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80 Page Novel

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By Austin Gridley

CHAPTER I.

SHADOW OF DEATH.

THE afternoon stagecoach of the Standard Lines left Wilcey Center for Rangeville exactly on schedule.

Four rode with the coach. Three were visible. They were the driver, the express guard, and a kindly faced old passenger. The fourth was not visible.

The fourth was Death!

The day was bright. The sun was high in the vaulted blue heavens. And yet that shadow seemed to move with the coach as it rattled along.

"Tuffy" McShane, the express guard, appeared to sense it more than his mate on the box, "Gawky" Henderson. The latter handled the reins loosely. He was evidently more interested in his cud of tobacco than anything else.

Henderson was long and lean. The

length of his neck had given him his nickname. He almost slept as he drove, though occasionally he squinted ahead at the road winding through the sage and disappearing into the distant hills.

"Did you examine your irons 'fore we left, pard?"

The voice was Tuffy McShane's. The express guard looked meaningly at Henderson.

"I always do, Tuffy," Henderson replied. He paused a few seconds. "Why?"

"Oh—nothin'," Tuffy McShane said, and lapsed into silence again. But somehow his every action was like that of a hawk, in its quick, nervous tension.

He looked down at his own brace of holstered .45s. His big, bony hands cradled the double-barreled shotgun a little more snugly across his knees. His small, black eyes—they looked like twin chips of jet—swiveled about. They took in the precipitous walls of the narrow canyon through which the stage was rumbling.

"This 'ud sure be a hell of a nice place to pull a holdup," Tuffy McShane remarked.

Henderson eyed him critically. Then he grinned, and showed a remarkable set of teeth for a man of fifty. All his original thirty-two teeth—except one—were firmly seated in his gums. And that single missing one had been kicked out by a mustang.

"That seems a right odd remark—comin' from *you*," Henderson said.

And it did seem odd. Tuffy McShane was a hard hombre. There was always a little whisky in him, but never one shred of fear. He would have fought a brace of cougars in a den of rattlesnakes. He shared with "Pistol Pete" Rice, sheriff of Buzzard Gap, the distinction of being the best shot in Trinchera County, Arizona.

Tuffy nodded. "I know it. But sometimes a feller sort o' feels things." He looked oddly up at the scrub growth dotting the canyon walls.

"Wouldn't be much place to hide around here," was Gawky Henderson's opinion. "Too much rock. Anyhow, who'd want to stick us up?" He lowered his voice. "Not a soul knows about it."

"Listen!" There was a snap to McShane's command. "Things like this is bound to leak out. An' when there's gold in the boot of a stage, a feller'd ought to keep on his toes."

Tuffy swung his body around. He bent low to get a glimpse of the stagecoach's lone passenger.

The latter was slumped in his seat. His clothes were in disarray. A half-empty quart bottle of whisky beside him might have explained his position and his slumbers. His body swayed with the stage as the team clattered over the uneven, rocky terrain.

"He's asleep, anyhow," Tuffy remarked. "Harmless-lookin' old codger. But that redeye in the bottle sure's got teeth in it. I wouldn't mind a shot of it myself."

"He offered you one before," Henderson reminded him.

"Yeah. But I always take water with it. For instance," Tuffy added with a grin, "if I take three quarts o' whisky a day, I take three quarts o' water with it. I'll take him up on that drink when we reach the water hole."

The road swung out of the canyon. It swept around a patch of cottonwoods. Ahead, about two miles, was the tall spire of granite guarding the Ten Mile Water Hole.

McShane's face grew serious again. "Gawky, did you ever have a queer feelin' inside you?" he asked. "Like before somethin' happens?"

Henderson glanced queerly at the guard. "Don't reckon I have," he answered. "Exceptin'," he added, "before meal times. Then I got a feelin'

I'm goin' to eat—if there's any chuck around."

A puff of wind swayed the chaparral. It drew the guard's attention for a moment before he spoke again.

"I don't mean like that. I had feelin' like this once before. In Texas. I was doin' some work for the Cattle Association. A rustler gunny tried to dry-gulch me. I turned just at the right second."

"You got him?"

"Through the heart—that's all," Tuffy answered grimly.

The guard continued: "I don't know what it is, Gawky, but I get feelin's that way. I got that feelin' now. An' I ain't takin' no chances. First sign o' trouble, I'll shoot first an' ask questions later."

"Maybe you're right," Henderson conceded. "But this is only the second shipment o' gold we've run. Rattigan's sure no one knows about it."

"He *thinks* he's sure," Tuffy corrected. "An hombre can never be sure about anything. There's always rannies in this section that's willin' to trade lead for gold."

He let his eyes wander across the sage. A blue haze was creeping up in the distance. Toward the sun, a flaming curtain of gold was overspreading the heavens as it sank slowly toward the rim of the horizon.

"Well, the Hole's just ahead," Henderson said. "We'll get the waterin' over pronto, an' hustle on toward Rangerville. I'll buy you a drink when we hit the Rangerville Bar."

"Mister," Tuffy came back with mock formality, "that offer is here an' now accepted."

Henderson's long black whip curled out like a snake. The two deep-chested roans lengthened their stride. Like a tail on a swooping comet, the stage whipped around the curve. It swept across the last half-mile of flat sageland and pulled up with a squealing of brakes at the base of the rocky peak.

As it skidded to a halt, McShane leaped lightly to the ground. He did not let go of the shotgun. His black eyes combed the terrain on every side. McShane had "that feeling," and was taking no chances.

THE seamed face of the passenger framed itself in the stagecoach door. His hair was awry. His eyes blinked drowsily.

"I reckon I went to sleep on you," he said. He got out of the coach, fished a collapsible tin cup from a pocket, adjusted it, and went over to the water hole. He dipped up some water and drank it.

"Maybe you've changed your mind about that drink," he guessed, as he turned toward McShane.

McShane grinned. "There ain't no 'maybe' about it," he returned. "I was waitin' till I could get a chaser."

He took the bottle that the passenger proffered, took a long pull at it, finally handed it back.

"Thanks, old-timer."

"You're sure as welcome as the flowers in May. Want a chaser? Here's the cup, pard. An' in drinkin' after me, you won't get nothin' worse than hydrophobia."

Tuffy took the cup, dipped it into the small pool divided from the rest of the water hole by a rim of rock. He took a long drink.

Gawky Henderson was loosening the cinches of the horses for a moment. Then he unfastened two buckets from the bottom of the stage and proceeded to water the thirsty animals.

"Hey, driver! Drink?" the passenger asked. He held up the bottle.

Henderson shook his head. "No, thanks. I'll wait till we hit town."

"Ain't even takin' a drink o' water?" came the jocular question.

"Nope. Water don't mean as much to me as to some folks."

The passenger disappeared inside the coach. His head went back. His eyes closed. His body sagged.

"Funny old bird," Henderson remarked to McShane in a low tone.

McShane nodded. "Sure is. About ready, Gawky?"

"Ready in two shakes, Tuffy."

Henderson completed his duties quickly. He slung the two buckets beneath the coach again and climbed up on the box. The heavy stage rumbled along the road. The whip snapped. The horses gained speed.

The route led down a long incline toward the ghost-town of Last Hope. The shacks and ramshackle buildings still stood, but only a few of them were occupied.

Some one in a small cabin waved a greeting. Tuffy McShane waved back. The ghost-town was passed. The way led along the open road again.

"Reckon that feelin' you had was just imagination," Gawky Henderson ventured.

"Maybe," Tuffy McShane conceded. "But somehow, whenever that feelin' comes over me——"

Tuffy broke off abruptly. "Look at that hoss!"

Henderson, the driver, was already looking at it. It was the slightly larger horse of the team. It was out of its stride.

McShane glanced at Gawky, the specialist in horseflesh. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Henderson cocked an ear. "Plenty, I'm thinkin'," he replied. "Listen to 'em breathin'. Both of 'em. Their wind is wrong!"

The larger horse stumbled, and Henderson kept it from going down by a sharp jerk of the reins.

Then, with the speed of a striking rattler, it happened: The larger horse sagged, a dead weight in the harness. The coach went ahead jerkily for a foot or two. The other horse breathed laboredly. Then it, also, sagged. Its head drooped.

Henderson leaped from the box. His hands ran gently across the horses' heads. The animals were trembling now. Their legs were shaky. Tiny rivulets of sweat trickled down their flanks. Their breath came in heaves.

"By golly!" Henderson gasped. These hosses act just like they've been——"

HIS diagnosis was cut short by a moan on the box. Henderson's eyes flashed across the horses' backs—just in time to see Tuffy McShane crumple up.

The express guard slipped from the seat and fell into the road before Henderson could catch him. Tuffy's rifle had dropped beneath the wagon tongue. One .45 had slipped from its holster.

Henderson knelt by the guard's inert form. "Tuffy! What's the matter, old pard? What's wrong?"

His words were staccato, bullet-fast, yet tinged with a tone of pleading. "Come on, pard, speak to me."

Tuffy lay mute, unconscious.

"Can I help in any way?"

Henderson looked up. The elderly passenger was getting out of the coach.

"Maybe a little whisky might help him," he suggested. "Might be the heat. See if his heart's beatin'."

Henderson bent his head over Tuffy's form. He listened for the beat of the guard's heart.

The harmless-looking old passenger was far from harmless now. His eyes were as cold as death. He clutched the quart whisky bottle by the neck, raised it like a club.

Crash! The heavy bludgeon came down over Henderson's skull. The force of the blow was terrific. The bottle smashed into fragments.

Henderson collapsed. A trickle of blood flowed from his head, dyed the yellowish sand of the road.

The elderly passenger picked up the .45 that Tuffy had dropped. He brought the barrel down over Henderson's head. Then he grinned. His manner suggested an act well accomplished.

He stepped to the side of the road. His eyes swept the terrain like a vulture's. A clump of cottonwoods set back off the highway was his focusing point. He whistled twice. It was a low whistle, but the sound carried well through the still air.

There was a pause. Then a group of riders slowly emerged from the shelter of the trees. As they rode nearer, it could be seen that they were masked. At the stage they halted, dismounted.

One, obviously the leader, spoke to the old passenger.

"Everything accordin' to schedule. No hitches, huh?"

The passenger grinned and nodded. "I said I could do it." There was a certain boastfulness in his voice.

The masked leader turned to his companions. "Get those out o' the way." He motioned to the prostrate men. "Both dead?"

"This hombre's breathin' a little," another masked man said as he knelt beside the form of Henderson.

"Well, you know how to remedy that. Get 'em both out o' here. An' make sure there's no marks."

The men proceeded to carry out their chief's orders.

The leader turned back to the elderly passenger. "No one suspected anything? You didn't speak to anybody?"

"Nope. No one'll talk."

"That's right," the leader agreed. His voice was soft. "No one'll talk. There's only one here that *might!* An' he won't be talkin' any from now on!"

His hand whisked to his belt. A thin, snakelike blade flashed in the dying sun. It looked more like a snake than ever as it struck out. The pointed steel ripped into the chest of the elderly passenger.

The elderly passenger pitched forward.

Then the masked leader was on top of him. His left hand reached around, clutched the withered old throat. The old man gasped wheezily—just once.

The leader's right hand came up. Another flash of steel in the sun. Another. Still another. Each time the knife was buried to the hilt in the back of the elderly passenger. The leader's henchmen looked on calmly.

The leader got to his feet. He took out a red bandanna and wiped off the blade of the knife.

"He was right," he said. "No one'll talk. He was a mouthy old jasper when he had a bellyful o' redeye."

There was a swish of wings overhead. The leader looked up.

A buzzard was flying low. It was staring down at a possible feast. It veered away from the road with a rustling sound.

That sound might have been the swish of the wings of Death.

CHAPTER II.

THE HOMBRE CALLED BRAINSTEDT.

THE lights of Buzzard Gap were on. Those in the Punchers' Rest, the most popular saloon, glowed welcomingly.

The more intelligent of the saloon's patrons realized that whisky—in quantity—was no good; that in fact it was harmful—much.

Yet within those batwing doors was companionship. There was conversation. There was laugher. There was warmth on chilly nights, and somehow the heat did not seem so bad in there on hot afternoons and evenings.

The Arizona Hotel, too, was a bright spot of this county seat.

So was the Buzzard Gap Feed Store, which its proprietor, Sam Hollis, was preparing to close for the night.

And so was the barber shop of Law-

rence Michael Hicks—"Misery" Hicks, as he was known by all of Buzzard Gap, a big part of Trinchera County, and even in remote sections of the State of Arizona.

Sam Hollis was a light drinker, so he did not turn into the Punchers' Rest after he had closed his feed store. He had already eaten his supper, so he did not cross to the Arizona Hotel. Instead, the lights of Misery Hicks's barber shop seemed to lure him. Followed by his liver-colored hound dog, he strolled down the yellow-pine sidewalk and turned in.

It was one of those evenings when a man would rather go almost any place than home—at least until it was time to get some sleep.

Sam found Misery Hicks busy. Not at barbering, for the chair was covered with a white cloth and razors and shears were locked up. But Misery Hicks had other lines. He was one of Sheriff Pete Rice's deputies.

He was also a sort of medicine man. He seemed to hold the afflictions of Buzzard Gap in his fingers. At present, he was engaged in pasting labels on bottles of various sizes and shades.

"Howdy, Misery," Sam Hollis greeted. "You sure got plenty o' medicine there. Must be a passell o' sick folks hereabouts."

Misery Hicks whirled. He liked Sam Hollis. He would have loaned Sam his last penny. He would have cut his hair after hours, or would have sat up with Sam all night if the latter had been ill. But since Sam was his friend, he could afford to be a little irritable with him.

"By jaspers! You don't get the idea at all!" he shot back. "You hombres seems to think you got to wait till a feller's on his back 'fore you start to treat him. That ain't it at all!"

The little barber-deputy's Irish-blue eyes blazed with the light of an enthusiasm over a hobby. He shook the bottle he was holding until the liquid foamed.

"Now, take this mixture here in my hand. I got it from a Hopi medicine man. If you find a friend o' yours comin' down with a bad cold, don't wait till he's in bed. Just dose him two-three times with this. An' in a day or so, you'll find that same hombre might be able to lick you in a stand-up fight."

He pointed to a section of the shelf in front of the barber chair. "Now, take them pink bottles. A woman over in Mesa Ridge was comin' down with a misery in her back. She took two bottles. She never developed the misery. You see, Sam, this is an age o' preventive medicine. This is——"

"Misery!"

A call from the rear of the establishment interrupted the barber's professional discourse.

"O. K., Pete," Misery answered. "I'll be back with you in two shakes!"

Sam saw that Misery and his boss were due to be busy. He turned toward the door.

"I ain't much of a drinker," he said, "but speakin' o' sovereign remedies, there's some stuff up in bottles at the Punchers' Rest Saloon that most always cures me o' lonesomeness. Reckon I'll mosey up there an' give myself a little treatment."

He wandered out into the street, turned toward the saloon. Misery scurried back to the room at the rear of the shop.

This was where Sheriff Pistol Pete Rice had his official headquarters. It was the sheriff's office of Buzzard Gap, the center of justice for Trinchera County.

A GAUNT-FACED young man sat behind a battered table which he used as a desk. Various papers and posters of "Wanted" men were strewn about. But the man at the table was engaged with a magnifying glass which he was holding over a section of cowhide nearly a foot square.

The man was Pistol Pete Rice, sheriff of Buzzard Gap and Trinchera County.

His face was too rugged to be called handsome. But the man was clean-cut, frank-looking. His features showed courage—fearlessness, in fact. His skin was browned by long exposure to the blazing Arizona sun.

His eyes, of a smoky-gray shade, gave no hint of the hardness they could show at times—when Pete Rice was face to face with killers or other criminals.

His hair was string-straight. An unruly bang had escaped from the wide gray Stetson, and fell over his forehead. His angular jaws moved with rhythmic precision on a wad of chewing gum. Pete usually chewed gum when he was thinking.

"I reckon I got this problem figured out a little better," he said. "That sure was some expert brand-blottin' them rannies put over. We couldn't figure things out so well when we was on the range. So Teeny Butler took one o' the sick critters an' killed it. It was sufferin', anyhow. He cut off this section o' the hide, where the brand was."

Pete Rice held up the magnifying glass. "I got this from Doc Buckley. It's a special sort o' glass—used in some doctor's place in Tucson, Doc said. It shows somethin' right interestin'. Look through that glass, Misery."

Misery Hicks focused his blue eyes on the glass. "That brand has sure been tampered with, all right!" he remarked.

Pete chewed his gum. "Sure has. Now, that new hombre in these parts—Brainstedt—bought out the Circle Cross Ranch, didn't he?"

Misery nodded. "I never liked the looks o' that jasper," he remarked. "Uglier-lookin' than a buzzard."

"Looks," Pete Rice told his deputy, "don't make much difference. Take that homely old dog o' Sam Hollis's. An' take a rattler. Just on pure beauty the rattler, with his colorin' an' his grace, an' maybe a nice diamond figure on its back, is better lookin'. But I'll take the dog, personal. An' I reckon you would, too. But I'm sayin' Brainstedt is a crook, at that. Look at that brand close, Misery."

Misery took another glance through the glass, and fidgeted.

"Don't you get it, pard?" Pete asked. "Them Bar C strays run right close to Brainstedt's new Circle Cross property, don't they? Now, see what this magnifyin' glass brings out. Hold it up this way—at an angle."

Misery let out a whoop. The rebranding had completed the "C" into a full circle. It had also added a vertical bar to the horizontal one. Some one had been changing Bar C cattle over to Circle Cross ownership—by brand-blotting so skillful that only a special magnifying glass could bring out the trickery.

"I got it, boss!" Misery said. "An' I reckon Brainstedt'll have to make an explanation. Say! I seen that ranny pass the place a spell ago. Ten to one he's liquorin' up at the Punchers' Rest."

"We might take a little pasear up there an' see what he's got to say for himself, Misery."

"I'll be with you in a jiffy, boss," the smaller man said. He ran into the front of the shop, changed his white coat for a dark one, and buckled on a cartridge belt.

PETE RICE had got up from the table and had put out the lamp. He was peering through the back window.

"Thought I heard some one prowlin' around out there," he remarked in a low tone, as Misery rejoined him.

He waited there a full moment, with Misery at his side. There was no noise from the rear. Pete strolled through the front of the shop. Misery banged the front door after him, and locked the place for the night.

The pair stood a moment at the mouth

of the alley which led back toward the jail. Pete's eyes were peering into the gloom of the alley. Finally, he started with Misery toward the Punchers' Rest.

"Will it be prison for Brainstedt?" Misery wanted to know.

"Well, that's all accordin'. I don't know much about Brainstedt. If he turns out more decent than I thought, an' wants to make up for the Bar C critters he stole, I might intercede with Judge Grange for him."

"It won't be much of a case, anyhow," was Misery's opinion. The little fellow sighed. "It's some time since we had a big, interestin' case, boss."

"We can't expect big ones all the time," Pete told his deputy. "It's these irritatin' little ones that takes up most of a peace officer's time."

He tossed his chewing gum into the road. He found a new oblong in his pocket, crumpled it up, and stuck it into his mouth.

"When you spread your blankets on the range, Misery," he said, "it ain't the vicious lobo wolf that bothers you from goin' to sleep, is it? No, sirree! It's the howlin' o' coyotes. That's the way with life, general. It's the little things that keep a hombre busy, mostly—an' keep him most irritated, too."

Just ahead of him, Pete noticed Sam Hollis's hound dog lying outside the swing doors of the Punchers' Rest. It was stretched out, a perfect figure of utter relaxation.

But suddenly it bounded to its feet. Its ears showed interest in something. Its tail was pointed straight out. Every line bespoke vigilance. It faced Pete and his deputy. Yet its attention was riveted on something back of them.

Pete whirled. He found nothing irregular. A few men were clumping along the pine-plank sidewalk back by Misery's shop. A buckboard was clattering along the street. Nothing unusual. Yet the dog's attitude was highly unusual.

"That hound o' Sam's hears somethin'," Pete remarked.

The sheriff stopped, listened carefully. A few seconds later, he heard it himself. His ears were so sensitively attuned that the least break in normal audibility was telegraphed with bullet-like speed to his brain.

A horse was coming along the main street—far back of him. It had probably only reached the edge of town, coming from the direction of Rangerville. It was approaching fast. The sound of its beating hoofs grew louder.

"By jaspers! Somebody's in a powerful hurry, boss," Misery Hicks cried.

The sheriff said nothing. He stood there in a tense position.

"Maybe, boss," Misery ventured, "this little rebrandin' case'll have to wait, huh? This don't sound like no yappin' coyote business. It might be the wolf a-howlin' this time!"

Pete Rice continued to chew his gum thoughtfully. The hoofbeats grew louder and louder. There was a desperation in the beat of that frantic galloping.

Pete finally spoke. "Somehow, Misery," he said, "I got a hunch that it is."

PETE'S hunch grew stronger as he saw the rider pull up short in front of Misery's barber shop.

"He wants you, all right, Pete," Misery predicted. "No one never rode into town that fast just to get a shave or a haircut."

The pair were already racing back toward the shop.

A man had dismounted from a spent roan. He walked quickly toward Pete and Misery. He addressed his remarks to the sheriff. "You're Pete Rice," he said, an'——"

"An' you're Wade Farberson," Pete cut in. The sheriff had a cameralike eye. He seldom forgot a face he had seen once.

"That's right, sheriff. I'm from Rangerville."

Pete nodded. "I know. You own the hotel there."

"That's it. The Rangerville House. There's big stuff breakin' over——"

The sheriff put up a hand. "Wait a minute, Mr. Farberson. We'll go into my office. This is my deputy, Mr. Hicks. You can say anything necessary before him."

Pete had noticed Brainstedt coming along the street from the direction of the Punchers' Rest. He got Farberson into his office before Brainstedt drew even with the shop.

He got Farberson a chair, for Farberson was far from a young man. He was badly spent by his ride, and was breathing hard. As he tried to get his breath before commencing his story, Pete studied him closely.

He was a man of perhaps fifty-five. His hair was liberally streaked with silver. His face showed ruggedness, the eyes honesty. The irises were bloodshot, undoubtedly from some physical disorder.

Farberson finally got his breath. He hitched his chair closer to Pete's table.

"I expected an old friend on the stage from Wilcey Center early this evenin'," he said. "I thought the world of him. He was a little up against it. I told him he could stay at my hotel as long as he liked—rest of his life, if he wanted."

His throat seemed dry. Pete got up, poured a glass of water from a pitcher and handed it to the older man, who drank it and continued:

"When the stage got an hour late, I got worried. Finally—although even then I didn't suspect anything—I sent a telegram to Wilcey Center, found that the stage had left the terminal there on schedule. I didn't worry so much till I found a little later that Rattigan—you must know Tom Rattigan that owns the Standard Stage Lines——"

Pete nodded.

"—got a note threatenin' his death. I put two an' two together. Seemed right funny that Rattigan 'ud be threatened an' his stage turn up 'way late about the same time. Funny business, I reckoned. So I got some fellers from town together. We rode out to meet the stage."

"You found somethin' had happened? Holdup?"

"Gosh! Worse'n that! Sure is a mystery for your whiskers! That stagecoach had disappeared like the earth had swallowed it!"

"Did you check up along the route that——"

"We done that," Farberson cut in. "Here's the facts: The stage carried three men. There was Tuffy McShane, actin' as a sort o' guard. You know the rep *he's* got as a fightin' man."

Pete nodded again. He knew all about McShane's reputation. More than once, McShane had ridden in Pistol Pete Rice's posses.

"Well, there was McShane, an' the driver, an' this old pard o' mine comin' as a passenger."

"Wilcey Center has some gold-diggin's out from there a piece. Was there anything valuable in the boot o' the stage?"

"I wouldn't know that, sheriff. But the stage was seen to pass Last Hope. That little ghost-town, you know. An old prospector that still lives in a cabin there claims he seen it pass."

Farberson ran his hand through his thin, whitening hair. "An' the funny part is that at the little settlement o' Placer, only two-three miles on, *nobody* seen the stage pass!"

Pete Rice stood up. "You mean to say that in broad daylight, that stage disappeared between them two settlements so close together?"

"Absolutely, sheriff. It vanished into thin air!"

"Any clews at all?"

"Not a danged one, sheriff. We followed the tracks along the road past

Last Hope. About a mile farther on, they stopped. There was some hoof-marks, an' a jumble o' wheel tracks like you'd find on almost any part o' the road. But no marks o' that stage. That stage stopped at a certain point—an' then evaporated!"

"But the deputy at Rangerville—Shorty Dunne? Ain't he on the case?"

Farberson showed excitement. "I was comin' to that. Shorty was sniped at in his office just as I was goin' to report the matter to him. He's laid up with a bullet in his shoulder. That's why I rode over here—to get you."

"There may be more to this than the disappearance o' the stagecoach," was Pete Rice's opinion.

"Maybe. I don't know much about such things. But I'm worried to beat hell about that pard o' mine that was a passenger. O' course, I'm worried about McShane an' the driver, too. They was good hombres. But, natural-like, it's my friend—his name is Ed Seymour—that I'm worryin' about most."

Farberson got up from the chair and walked over to a map of Trinchera County tacked to the wall of the office. He pointed to the dot indicating Wilcey Center.

"Just imagine this, sheriff!" he said. "The stage leaves the Center on time. It's seen to pass through here an' here an' here."

He indicated small towns on the map. "It's seen to pass here." He put his finger on a little circle which indicated the ghost-town of Last Hope. An' by golly! Here"—and he indicated the settlement of Placer, a couple of miles farther on—"it never gets to! O' course, if it was only a stickup, it wouldn't be so mysterious, but——"

Boom!

There was a crash of glass. A bullet lanced by Pete Rice's face and shattered the mirror in the front of the shop.

Boom!

A second bullet traced a path of leaden death through the room, spatted against the side of the barber chair.

There was a third rifle report. And Pistol Pete Rice flopped to the floor.

CHAPTER III.

DOUBLE-BARRELED MYSTERY.

PETE had not been hit. But he was too seasoned a campaigner to stand upright there before the window. He wanted to protect Misery Hicks and Farberson, too. He lay on the floor. His hand flashed for one of his .45s.

The weapon cracked. The lamp went out as Pete's bullet crashed through it. Now, at least, he and the other two men in the room were not shining targets.

The sheriff got to his feet, rushed over and trampled out the little snake of flame writhing across the wooden floor in the vicinity of the shattered lamp. The room was in pitch darkness, except for the dim rays of the moon.

Another gun-flare stabbed the darkness outside of Pete's office, to the rear. But now the sniper had no shining target to shoot at. And Pete was already on hands and knees, crawling toward the front of the shop.

"You stay here with Farberson, Misery!" he called over his shoulder. "I'll get that rattler out there!"

He did not wait to argue with Misery, but raced to the front of the shop, and out. He ran into the alley, within a pair of seconds was in the black space which adjoined the back yard of his headquarters. His .45s were in his hands.

A rifle flamed again from the roof of a dark old adobe, and a bullet whined close to Pete.

Pete raised his .45s. They spat bullets in the direction of the adobe roof.

The sheriff circled the adobe. He believed the sniper had had time to leap to the ground. He felt certain of it a second later as another orange-red spurt gashed the darkness. There was the

sound of running feet—a moving blob in the gloom just ahead.

"Stop!" Pete roared. "I got you covered!"

The blob continued to move. Pete fired. He aimed low—at the fugitive's legs. He saw the blurry figure go down like a roped horse; then heard two more rifle shots from about a hundred yards back. But the bullets did not even come near him, this time.

He ran back in the direction where the latest rifle shots had come from. He was taking a chance, taking danger by the throat. He had got one man—wounded him, at least, brought him down. He poised himself to fire at the flashes when the next shot came from the wounded man's confederate.

But no further shots came. The confederate, if such he was, had cold feet, had fled across that pit of inky blackness between two deserted adobes.

There was a clear path into the huddle of shacks that was Mex Town. The sniper could take any one of half a dozen alleys. It would be useless to try to trail him now; meanwhile, the wounded man might get away. And the wounded man could be forced to tell the name of his confederate.

Pete ran back to the man he had dropped. The latter got to his feet once, but collapsed.

"I didn't do it!" he called out in a rasping voice. "I didn't do it!"

Pete Rice's eyes widened. It was too dark to see the man's face. But that voice, with its distinctive trace of accent, was unmistakable. It belonged to Serge Brainstedt. Folks said Brainstedt was a Russian.

THE mystery of the shots began to clear a little in Pete's brain. Brainstedt must have known he was under suspicion for stealing cattle and brand-blotting. He must have spied on Pete Rice that evening, suspected Pete of examining the new brand, and determined to kill the sheriff before the news could get out.

"You didn't do it, eh?" Pete taunted. "No? Then what was you runnin' for? An' what was you totin' this for?"

He picked up the rifle that Brainstedt had dropped when he had fallen. He smelt of the barrel. The gun had very recently been discharged.

"But I didn't!" Brainstedt insisted. "One shot I fired—yes! But then more shots came. And one of them got me. I am dying!"

Pete grinned. He had aimed at the running man's legs. When Pete aimed at a target, he hit that target. Brainstedt might think he was dying. But a week or so of medical care would put him in condition to be placed in the hoosegow to await arraignment.

"I'll carry you into the shop, Brainstedt," the sheriff said. "I don't reckon you'll die. You'll die in prison, though. You're an old man, an' you'll get plenty on these two charges—brand-blottin' an' attempted murder."

He started to lift the form of Brainstedt. The latter groaned piteously. As Pete turned him over, he felt the blood flowing from a wound in the left side, a few inches below the heart. And he, Pete Rice, had shot at the man's legs!

That was why Pete Rice had not heard the bullets after those two final rifle shots had come from about a hundred yards back. The second rifleman had fired those shots at Brainstedt! But why?

Brainstedt collapsed and lapsed into unconsciousness as Pete carried him back through the alley and into the barber shop. A crowd of the curious had already assembled before the barber shop door.

Misery let the sheriff in, and locked the shop.

The front lamp was lighted, and Brainstedt's wounds examined in detail. There was a nick below the right knee —Pete Rice's shot. It had been enough

to bring Brainstedt down, but that was all.

However, Brainstedt, as he had claimed, really was dying. Blood flowed from his left side. Pete could do little or nothing to staunch the ugly wound.

Experience in similar cases told him that even sending for a doctor would do no good. Brainstedt was going out—within minutes. Possibly two minutes. Possibly three or four.

Farberson seemed affected by the sight of blood. But little Misery Hicks bathed the dying man's forehead and washed his face with some of his most expensive lotions.

Brainstedt opened his eyes.

"Why did you try to shoot me, Brainstedt?" Pete asked. "You're an old man. I'd have tried to give you a chance. But you was guilty o' that brand-blottin', wasn't you?"

Brainstedt nodded weakly. "Yes. I don't deny that. I don't deny, either, that I shot at you—once. Then I changed my mind. I saw that the bullet missed you. I found I couldn't kill, after all. I ran to get away. But I am old. I run not very fast."

"Do you know the man who shot you in the side? Did you have a confederate in this business?"

For a moment, Brainstedt could not speak. He merely shook his head from side to side.

"You sure?" Pete insisted. "Remember, you're a dyin' man. Come through. Tell the truth."

"I had no—what you call confederate, sheriff. I start out to do this job—alone by myself," came the halting and slightly accented words. "I am dying. I tell the truth. I swear I do not——"

Brainstedt's voice seemed to come from a distance. "I swear I——"

A queer sob sounded in the dying man's throat. Suddenly he was a dead weight in Pete Rice's arms.

Pete let the body down gently. Had Brainstedt lied, even while dying? Did he wish to protect some confederate? Or had Brainstedt told the truth, as he seemed to be doing?

Who was that other rifleman who had blasted lead through the sheriff's back window, who had almost ended the career of Pete Rice? Could the attempted crime have been tied up in any way with the weird message that Farberson had brought? Could the shots of that other rifleman have been intended for Farberson?

Anyhow, here was a unusual mystery. Possibly one—with the sniping in Buzzard Gap linked with the stagecoach disappearance near Rangerville. Possibly two separate mysteries.

Pete was inclined to think somehow that they were linked. Misery Hicks's big "howling-wolf" case had come at last!

CHAPTER IV.

THE TRAIL BEGINS.

ANOTHER of Pete Rice's deputies came into the barber shop just as Brainstedt breathed his last. It was "Teeny" Butler, who had been investigating the brand-blotting case out on the range.

Teeny, a Texan christened William Alamo Butler, was a superb example of manhood. He was well over six feet tall. He weighed close to three hundred pounds. Yet there was little if any excess fat on his giant frame. He had been toughened by hard riding and clean living.

As soon as he had heard what had happened, he ran out of the shop and through the alley. He moved with the speed of a lightweight.

Pete joined his mammoth deputy a few minutes later. Teeny was an expert tracker, but seemed stumped on this particular case.

"Ah reckon he was right smart," he remarked in his Texas drawl. "What he done, seems to me, was to climb up another adobe, then leap across the alley

to the roof of another. He could drop down to the plank sidewalk then. Ain't much use tryin' to trail him."

Pete nodded. Sooner or later, Pete Rice would get the sniper. Or the sniper might get himself, as so many criminals did—loading themselves with whisky or *tequila*, bragging of their prowess, talking too much.

"Tell you what we got to do," Pete said. "This snipin' business is only a small part o' this case. I reckon there'll be bigger things happenin' over Rangerville way. We got to get a look at the spot where that stagecoach disappeared, an' the trail's growin' colder every minute. We're leavin' for Rangerville, Teeny."

"Ah'm your man," Teeny replied. "Ah'll go get the hosses."

He hustled after the horses, and Pete returned to the barber shop.

Doctor Buckley, coroner of Trinchera County, had arrived. He was making notes on a pad.

The Buzzard undertaker was preparing to remove Brainstedt's body. "Never thought I'd be totin' Brainstedt out feet-first so soon," he remarked to Pete. "Why, I had a drink with him at the Punchers' Rest only a few minutes ago. Brainstedt wasn't a bad feller."

"No, I reckon not," Pete agreed. He never spoke ill of the dead. "He had a lots o' good points. But greediness eats up every other quality in the heart."

Wade Farberson, looking somehow older and more worn, sat dejectedly in a chair at the rear of the shop. "Will you come to Rangerville, sheriff?" he asked almost pleadingly.

"Sure will," Pete replied. "Me an' my deputies'll be on the way in less than half an hour."

Farberson breathed in relief. "Good! Then I'll have company back. I got a hunch—I can't be sure, o' course—that this other sniper's shots was meant for me. Bein' a target may be part o' your business, sheriff, but it ain't mine. After I seen what happened, I don't want to ride back to Rangerville alone."

The Rangerville hotel man was still looking a little scary-eyed as, about twenty minutes later, he started to ride toward his home town with Pete Rice, Teeny Butler and Misery Hicks.

PETE RICE was wary as he led the little cavalcade along the moonlit trail. He was holding in Sonny, his beautiful sorrel.

Farberson's roan was spent, and could not be expected to keep up with Pete's horse or the mounts of Teeny and Misery.

Teeny rode his huge blood-bay. It was as much bigger than the average horse as Teeny was bigger than the average man. Misery Hicks rode his scrawny little strawberry-roan, which he called Caballero.

Pete was unusually quiet. His jaws worked on his cud of chewing gum. His mind was a turmoil of thoughts. Who had tried to ambush him? Why had that second sniper fired at Brainstedt? Or could Brainstedt have been struck by the rifle bullet accidentally?

The sheriff asked himself these questions over and over. Yet his keen eyes raked the gloom on both sides of the road. There seemed no sign of human life. Once in a while, far-off, a panther screamed or a coyote howled.

The quartet of horsemen swung around a bend in the road. Ahead lay the ghost-town of Last Hope. The settlement seemed like a big, scattered shadow. All of the tumble-down shacks were in darkness—except one. An eerie silence seemed to lay like a heavy blanket over the entire place.

"There's a light in that cabin on the end, Pete," Misery declared.

"Yep. I see it. We'll ride over an' check up."

Farberson and the lawmen spurred their horses mildly. The mounts responded to the slight prick of steel.

They galloped up toward the lighted cabin.

Pete dismounted. He rapped on the door. A half-moment's pause, and it swung back. An old, withered prospector was outlined in the doorway.

"Yes?" he asked.

"I'm Sheriff Pete Rice," Pete told him. "I wanted to ask you a few questions."

"Fire ahead."

"Did you see the Standard Lines stagecoach pass late this afternoon?"

"I sure did," was the answer. "It didn't lack much to sundown."

"You're sure it was the regular Standard stage?"

"Positive, sheriff. I rec'nized Gawky Henderson, by his long neck."

"The stage was headin' for Rangerville?"

"Yep. Goin' lickety-split, too."

The sheriff gazed down the dark road. It was a curtain of blackness, something like the veil of mystery that enshrouded this enigma.

"You got a lantern you could lend us, old-timer?"

"Sure thing!"

The old man clumped back to a corner of his disorderly cabin. He returned with a lantern. It was surprisingly clean, and the wick was trimmed. He struck a match on the sole of his boot, lighted the lantern, and handed it to Pete.

"Thanks, old-timer. I'll return it in a few minutes."

The lawmen and their companion mounted and rode back along the trail.

The flickering rays of the lantern picked out the several wagon tracks. They were still fresh. The day had been almost windless, and no sand had sifted into the ruts to deface them.

Pete pointed to one set of ruts. "The stagecoach made them, all right," he said. "We'll see where they stop."

Farberson and the lawmen followed these tracks—which finally dissolved into a maze of hoofmarks.

It was strange, fantastic, almost unbelievable. Pete looked at the sides of the road. On one side there was a stretch of sage. On the other, a rocky slope ascended. And there was no cover here, no place from which bandit horsemen might suddenly descend upon the coach.

Pete Rice's jaws were working—on his gum. He said nothing as he examined the road for several feet.

If the sheriff of Buzzard Gap had any theories about the mystery of the missing stagecoach, he did not voice them.

FARBERSON, the hotel man, was played out by the time the group reached Rangerville, and retired almost at once. But Pete Rice and his deputies were of younger and tougher fiber.

They made their headquarters at Farberson's Rangerville House, and cared for their horses. They ate the meal that Farberson insisted on having prepared for them.

Pete's first job was to see "Shorty" Dunne, the local deputy.

Shorty had little to report. He was in bed at his home, shot through the shoulder. It was obvious that he was sniped at to get him out of the way. He was a game little fellow, who within the next few days would be well enough to be out and attend to details for Pete Rice.

The sheriff's next job was to see Tom Rattigan, owner of the stagecoach which had utterly disappeared. Rattigan was full of fight, with nothing to fight.

He was entirely disinclined to believe that Horace Peters, owner of the rival Peters Stage Line, had had anything to do with the disappearance of the stagecoach, and in fact praised Peters to the skies.

The Peters Line coaches left Wilcey

Center—also the terminus of the Standard Lines owned by Rattigan—but instead of taking the direct route to Rangerville, swung around by the town of Soda Springs to give passenger and freight service to additional little towns.

The two stage lines made a junction a little above the Ten Mile Water Hole. and both continued over the same road into Rangerville.

"You're sendin' out your stages the same as ever?" Pete asked.

"Same as ever," was Rattigan's reply. "The Standard Lines coach leaves Wilcey Center on schedule to-morrow."

Pete nodded. He would work out some way of having that stage under surveillance for every mile of the trip.

It was well after dawn when Pete arrived back at the Rangerville House and turned in for some much-needed sleep.

IT was early in the evening that Pete and his deputies made another call in the outskirts of Rangerville. The sheriff had looked up the cabin of Swen Lindstrom, one of the Standard stage-coach company's drivers.

Lindstrom, Rattigan said, had also received a threatening letter.

The lawmen found Lindstrom alone in his cabin. He was square-jawed, blue-eyed, powerful of build. Character seemed written upon his face.

He smiled as he shook hands with Pete. "Yes, sheriff, I did get one o' them letters through the mail," he said in answer to Pete's question. "I was warned that unless I gave up my job drivin' for the Standard Lines, I mightn't live so long."

"An' are you givin' it up?" Pete asked.

"Not so's you could notice it!" Lindstrom's square jaw got still squarer. "I'm just goin' more heeled than ever. An' my express messenger—Bran Larrsen, my cousin—is gettin' equipped with a repeatin' rifle. If anybody tries any monkey-business with us, they'll get a right hot reception."

"That's the stuff," Pete said. He had extreme confidence in Lindstrom as a man. "If you see anything out o' the way—any time—you just let me know. Sometimes it's a loose end that don't seem too important at first that clears up a case like this."

It was late when the lawmen rode back toward town. Pete had learned much from Lindstrom—the location of water holes, possible places for ambuscades along the route, the scheduled time for arriving at and leaving various towns.

The main street was pretty well dark and deserted when the trio reached it. The stores, except for a couple of saloons, were closed.

Two quick shots cleaved the stillness of the night. Pete tensed in his saddle.

"By jaspers!" Misery exclaimed. "I wonder if some cow-puncher is gettin' frisky at this late hour——"

"They came from the hotel!" Pete cut in. He had given Sonny his head.

The sorrel pounded down the street. The horses of Teeny and Misery pounded along in his wake.

Some men were running out of a saloon diagonally across from the hotel. Pete and his deputies galloped past them, swung their mounts toward the hotel driveway.

Some one was riding madly away from the far side of the hotel. There was a rapid drumming of hoofs.

"Boys, get after that rider!" Pete yelled. "Don't drop the chase till you get him! I'll see what's happened inside the hotel. Get goin'!"

The two deputies spurred their mounts. Their horses went into break-neck speed.

Pete was off his horse in an instant. He raced around to the other side of the hotel. One of the rear rooms showed a light. It was Farberson's room—a sort of sitting-room-and-office

on the ground floor. The window-glass had been smashed.

Pete peered into the room. On the floor was stretched the body of a man. And lying half on the floor and half against a chair was another man.

Suddenly Pete thought of that sniper back in Buzzard Gap. Had he followed Farberson here to Rangerville? Had he been determined to get Farberson out of the way for some reason?

For the second man on the floor was Wade Farberson.

CHAPTER V.

THE TELL-TALE BRAND.

PETE RICE was inside the room within a second.

Farberson, he could see, was not dead, but was squirming and moaning with pain. He opened his eyes, motioned feebly toward the other man on the floor.

"Don't mind me now, sheriff," he said. "I can stand it. Help him."

But Pete Rice had worked close enough to death for some time to see that nothing could be done for the white-haired man lying in the sprawled, inert position near the window.

The sheriff lifted Farberson onto a saggy old leather couch in the corner. Blood ran from a wound in the hotel man's leg—the right one—and stained his light trousers.

"I passed out from pain," Farberson murmured. "But I'll—I'll be all right, I reckon."

Pete made an examination of his wound. It was a nasty flesh tear in the upper part of the leg. The sheriff tore his clean bandanna into strips. He bound the bleeding leg tightly.

A sharp rapping resounded on the door into the corridor. Voices were raised.

Pete Rice crossed the room, unbolted the door and swung it back. A group of men burst into the room. They started to break forth with queries.

"I'm Sheriff Pete Rice, if all o' you don't know it," Pete told them. "One o' you men run for the doctor. Farberson's all right, an' the doctor can ease his pain. Another one o' you better stop in for the undertaker. The other man is dead."

One of the excited visitors walked over and looked down at the white-haired figure sprawled near the window.

"Good gosh! Horace Peters!" he exclaimed.

Pete had not had time to meet Peters. But he knew that Peters had been the owner of the Peters Stage Line. Thoughts flashed in his active brain. The Rattigan stage spirited away—Rattigan, the stage line owner, threatened by letter. And now Peters, the owner of the rival stage line, dead! Could there be any connnection?

Pete finished making Farberson as comfortable as possible. The hotel man seemed still in great pain. But he appeared more interested in the fate of Peters than in himself.

"Peters dead!" he murmured. "This whole thing is gettin' to be a nightmare! I'll try to tell you what happened, sheriff."

He swallowed hard, wet his lips with his tongue.

"Peters an' I have been friends for years. I asked him to come here tonight—wanted him to talk with you. Of late he seemed worried about something, but I didn't try to pry him. Thought maybe you'd get it out of him better."

He looked oddly toward the shattered windowpane. "We visited pretty late, Horace an' me. I was tryin' to get Horace to stop over here for the night. I'd just turned away from the window, was goin' to show him that this couch was soft enough to sleep on. Then I heard the window crash. I was knocked

to the floor. Thought first I was hurt worse than I was."

"Did you get a flash outside the window? Could you see any one?"

"Only a form. Couldn't see any face. I turned around—just in time to see Horace drop to the floor. I tried to get to the window. Didn't have any gun on me, but I thought anyhow I might see who the killer was. No use. I got dizzy. Next thing I knew was when you came into the room."

One of the visitors in the room started for the door. "Say, maybe we could help get that killer," he said.

Pete whirled. "You stay right here. My deputies are after that killer. If they can't get him, nobody can! I want to talk with all you men in a few minutes."

The visitor—his appearance did not impress Pete too favorably—scowled darkly. "But can't we be any help? Can't we examine them tracks outside the window?"

"No!" Pete snapped. "Me an' my deputies'll do that later. You can help—yes. An' you can do it by standin' near that window an' seein' that no one else walks outside there to gum up the tracks that's already there."

The man nodded a little sullenly and walked over toward the window. Pete returned to questioning Farberson.

"Did Peters have any enemies that you knew of, Mr. Farberson?"

"Well——" Farberson seemed to hesitate—"I'd say no. Horace Peters was one o' the squarest shooters in these parts."

Pete's smoky-gray eyes held the bloodshot eyes of the older man. "You're dead sure?" he insisted.

"Oh, I don't want to be bringin' up old sores—without any reason," Farberson replied. "In the old days—when Tom Rattigan started his rival stage line—there might have been a little hard feelin'. There *might*, I say. But that all passed long ago."

"Tom Rattigan an' Horace Peters was friends?"

"That's just what they was, sheriff. When Tom Rattigan's stagecoach disappeared so mysterious, Horace Peters went to Tom an' asked if he could be of any help. Tom thanked him, but said he could get along all right. Tom's a right good scout, too."

Farberson clutched Pete's big hand feverishly. His eyes were slightly moist. His face was working queerly. He seemed on the verge of breaking down.

"I ain't used to all this excitement, sheriff. I ain't young any longer, an' my health ain't too good. You just got to help us here in Rangerville. This killin' stuff must be wiped out. An' you're the man to do it."

Pete Rice's jaw was squared. His smoky-gray eyes grew a shade darker. "Don't you worry. I'll do my best. These killers always slip sometimes. When this one does, I aim to be ready."

More citizens of the town came into the room. Among them was a gray-bearded man carrying a medicine kit. He glanced professionally at the white-haired man sprawled near the window.

"I can't do anything for that one," he said crisply.

He opened his bag, took out a hypodermic needle, gauze bandages and antiseptics. He started to fix up Farberson.

PETE RICE crossed the room and dropped out through the broken window. But first he removed his boots. He did not want to mix up the tracks he knew he would find near the window.

Unfortunately, though, the tracks were already badly mixed up. The light shed from the room showed crisscrosses of boot prints. This piece of ground led to the hotel stable. Many men must have walked past here earlier in the evening. The trail was badly gummed up. The one chance was that Misery and

Teeny would overtake the man who had made his get-away on the horse.

Pete returned to the room. He found that Swen Lindstrom had joined the group there. The sheriff addressed the men, paying particular attention to Lindstrom. The latter seemed fundamentally honest, courageous.

"Men," Pete said, "you see that killers are loose in Rangerville. Some mighty odd things are happenin.' Somethin' big is behind it all, somethin' that don't show on the surface. I'm depend-in' on you citizens to give me an' my deputies full coöperation. We must do everything to stamp out this strikin' rattler before he has time to coil again."

"We're back o' you, sheriff," Lindstrom said. "The men in this room all knowed Horace Peters. We ain't ashamed to say that we loved him. That goes for me, too, although I drive for Tom Rattigan's rival stage line. A ranny that could kill Peters must be plumb poisonous, or loco. He may be a hard hombre to get the goods on."

"Maybe," Pete conceded. "But I've seen hornets create a big ruckus—an' then sting themselves to death. Humans do the same thing, only most times the poison acts a little slower."

The sheriff's mind was racing now. The clews in this case—or rather the facts, for there was hardly a clew as yet—seemed as badly crisscrossed as those boot marks outside the window.

But one thing stood out: The men connected with the two stage lines—all except Farberson—had been the ones attacked or threatened. Could this mean anything?

Tom Rattigan had been threatened. Swen Lindstrom, the driver, had been threatened. A Standard Lines stagecoach had disappeared. The owner of the rival line, Horace Peters, had been foully murdered.

Even Wade Farberson, who had no interest in the stage lines proper, owned the hotel which was the terminal at Rangerville for both lines.

Pete's body tensed. The sound of galloping hoofs was borne to him over the still night air. They came closer. Pete listened carefully. He counted the hoofbeats. Three horses! Probably this was Misery and Teeny—returning with the killer!

If that was so, then this mystery might not prove as knotty as he had feared. The killer of Peters probably wasn't running this show all alone. He would be apt to talk, to implicate others. Most killers did, when they found themselves in the toils of the law.

The sound of hoofbeats grew louder. Pete shoved his head out of the window. He could make out a moving blob in the blackness back from the rear of the hotel.

"Is that you, boys?" he called out.

Misery's voice answered. "It's us, boss. But——"

"Ride around to the side driveway," Pete ordered. "We don't want to mix up them tracks beneath the window any more than they are."

He ran out into the corridor and into the side driveway. Several of the men in the room followed him.

Misery Hicks and Teeny Butler were dismounting from their sweating horses. Misery held the bridle of a rangy bay. The bay was riderless!

"You didn't get him, boys?" Pete asked in surprise.

Teeny spoke. "We didn't, boss." His voice was a little remorseful. It was not often that the big Texan and his scrawny little side-kick slipped up on a detail of this sort.

"Ah'm ridin' right back there," Teeny went on. "Reckoned we'd ought to come back first an' report. The rider must 'a' got away—slipped the hoss an' be in hidin' in some o' them cottonwood clumps or back o' some o' them boulders. If he's there, we'll get him, boss."

The big deputy was already mounting his mammoth blood-bay.

"Wait a minute, Teeny!" Pete whipped out.

THE sheriff was examining a welt on the horse's flank. That welt had been made by the barrel of a .45. The mark of the gun sight was unmistakable to a man who knew firearms as well as Pistol Pete Rice.

A rider would not have been apt to urge his horse ahead this way. A rider would have used his spurs. There were no spur marks on the bay.

In a flash, it came to Pete Rice what had happened.

There had been no rider! The murderer had probably ridden to the rear of the hotel on this bay. But after shooting through the window, he had clubbed his horse over the flank with his pistol. He had stampeded the horse into the darkness, hoping that some one would follow the animal, lose time on a false trail, while he, the killer, slunk away.

Possibly the murderer was right here in town. Possibly he was right here in this group!

"Never mind goin' back for that killer, boys," Pete said to his deputies. He gave no reason for his decision.

Pete's keen glance raked the men circled about the horse. Swen Lindstrom's rather pale blue eyes showed a look of amazement; then Swen turned to leave.

"Wait a minute, Lindstrom!" Pete snapped. "You look as if you knew that hoss!"

Lindstrom fidgeted. "I—I might be mistaken," he stammered.

"Yep. An' you might *not!* Come on, Lindstrom. I ain't suspectin' you of anything. You're an honest hombre—or else I never seen one. Whose hoss is that?"

Lindstrom tried to stall. But his honest, rugged face was not quite equal to it.

"Well, maybe I know that hoss," he admitted. "But—aw, say, sheriff, it ain't possible. I hate to cause trouble. Chances are the thing is a stall o' some kind."

"This is murder!" Pete insisted. "It's your duty, as an honest man, to tell what you know, whoever you involve. Come on, now! Whose hoss is that?"

Lindstrom shook his big blond head. "Well, as I say, I know Tom wouldn't do anything like this. But—but, well, this bay here is a hoss that I seen Tom Rattigan ridin' for the first time the other day! I remember the points o' the hoss—an' the Circle Cross brand."

Every muscle in Pete Rice's body went tense. The Circle Cross brand! Old Brainstedt had owned the Circle Cross spread!

The sheriff crossed to the other side—the branded side—of the rangy bay. The Circle Cross mark was unmistakable. But how did Tom Rattigan happen to be riding a Circle Cross cayuse?

"Did Rattigan know that you see him on this hoss?" Pete asked Lindstrom.

"I ain't sure, sheriff. I just happened to meet him along the road. Tom is always swappin' hosses."

Pete turned to his deputies.

"You know where Tom Rattigan lives, boys," he said. "Go to his house. Get Rattigan here—pronto!"

CHAPTER VI.

BLIND JOHN BLAKE.

WHILE waiting for his deputies to bring Tom Rattigan, Pete Rice walked back to the stretch of ground below the window through which the killer had fired the shots.

He was irritated to find that a man was already looking over the ground; and still more irritated to discover that it was the big, sullen-looking fellow to whom he had been forced to speak sharply in the hotel room.

"Did I tell you to stay away from

here?" Pete demanded. "Or didn't I?"

The big fellow had been looking at the ground. He straightened up. He towered half a head over Pistol Pete Rice.

"Maybe you did," he retorted sullenly. That he had been drinking was obvious. But that he was far from drunk was just as obvious.

"Well, do you reckon I mean what I say, or not?"

The big man flared up. "I ain't doin' no harm!" he flung back.

"You're makin' new tracks here."

"Well, so are you!" was the hot retort.

"No, I'm not." Pete motioned to his feet. When he had run out to the side driveway at the sound of hoofbeats, he had not taken the time to draw on his boots again. "You're makin' new boot-tracks. Vamose! Get out o' here!"

The big fellow opened his mouth to say something, apparently thought better of it—and then decided to go through with it anyhow.

"You can't put me out o' here!" he challenged.

For answer, Pete took him roughly by the arm—and then went back on his heels from a vicious clout to the jaw.

The big man seemed encouraged at the results of his punch. He sailed into Pete. And then the next instant he went sailing back again—from a hard right to the cheek bone.

Men came running along the side driveway.

"Stop that, Watson!" Swen Lindstrom yelled. "Don't you know that's the sheriff you're up against?"

"Let him be!" Pete snapped over his shoulder. He had never handled a major case in Rangerville before; he meant to impress these citizens who did not know him well that monkeying with the law was bad business.

He dodged the big fellow's next rush. Watson had come in like a bull, with his head down. Pete straightened him with a sharp uppercut.

But the big fellow's heavy boot came down on Pete's stockinged foot. Pete held his mouth tight to hold back a cry of pain. As the fellow rushed again, Pete took an awkward but hard right to the temple. He got Watson coming in, though. He brought the crimson from Watson's nose as he countered with a straight right.

Watson snarled. There was plenty of fight in him, anyhow. He charged in with flying fists. The light was bad. One of his floundering swings caught Pete Rice flush on the jaw.

It might not have happened just that way in a hundred and fifty times. Pete went to the ground.

Watson drew back his booted foot, then thought better of the action. Instead, he stood there cockily.

"No one's tellin *me* what to do!" he bragged. "No one's gettin' too fresh with *me!*"

But Pete Rice had bounded to his feet. His face was grim. His fists were flying. They beat a tattoo on Watson's face.

Watson was strong. He took part of the breath out of Pete with a sloppy right, fired aimlessly, which got Pete in the stomach. His next swing missed.

Then Pete was in a crouch, and timing his punches perfectly.

Slap! There was a sickening sound as his square-knuckled fist connected with Watson's nose. *Crack!* His left found Watson's jaw. *Crack!* His right found the same target.

Watson reeled. Pete was upon him like a panther. The big fellow clawed out aimlessly. The blows were easily blocked by Pete. A ripping uppercut in the midriff brought Watson down to Pete's size.

There was the sound of three hard cracks of bony knuckles on flesh. Watson went to the ground. He crumbled

One of his swings caught Pete Rice flush on the jaw.

head-first. He lay prone—and did not get up.

Pete turned to Lindstrom and motioned down at the unconscious form. "What does this ranny do in this town?" he asked.

"He don't do much of anything except slug redeye an' brawl," was Lindstrom's reply. The big blond driver chuckled. "Sure was a fool to tangle with you, sheriff."

Pete grinned. "Oh, I kind o' like the fools—for one reason, anyhow," he said. "They act more natural than most folks. An hombre knows what to expect from 'em."

"He was always lookin' for trouble," another man spoke up.

"If he looks for any more, he'll find it—plenty!" Pete snapped. "That goes for him, an' for any man in this town, from roustabout up to the biggest muckymuck here. We got more important work to do than creatin' trouble. I want the help of every decent man here."

"You'll get it, sheriff!" Lindstrom said heartily. "We're with you four ways from the ace."

"Thanks, hombre," Pete acknowledged.

Before Watson came to, Pete turned

and walked into the hotel to see how Farberson was coming along.

THE hotel proprietor had been carried to his own room. He lay in bed. As he talked with Pete, and assured the sheriff that he would be all right soon, he looked up lovingly from time to time at a portrait on the bedroom wall.

It was a colored portrait of a woman—the sort of portrait that salesmen in buggies frequently sold to ranchers.

"Mrs. Farberson," the hotel man explained. "She's on a visit with relatives in the East right now. Glad of it, too. She'd worry about this little injury o' mine."

Pete's quick glance swept over the picture. The face showed strength of character; the eyes softness, kindness. The woman seemed at least twenty years younger than Farberson.

"It's women like her," the hotel man murmured, "that make men want to be square. There's a woman lives for charity, for the kind acts she can do for others——"

He broke off. "Sounds like hosses outside."

Pete got up. "Yep. Reckon it's my deputies returnin'. See you later, Mr. Farberson."

The sheriff walked out to the driveway. Teeny and Misery had brought in Tom Rattigan.

The stage line owner looked glum. He had been told about the murder of old Horace Peters. He had a square face, a small, pugnacious nose, a strong jaw. He was probably in the middle fifties. His hair was abundant, but well frosted at the sides. His dark-blue eyes showed glints of irritation.

"Say, sheriff! What the hell is all this?" he demanded. "Bad enough to hear about old Horace's death. But it all came to me as I rode up here. By golly! Do you reckon *I* had anything to do with it?"

"I'll ask the questions, Rattigan," Pete informed him crisply. He walked over to the back of the side porch, untied the rangy bay that had been tethered there, led the animal out into the open.

"Do you own this hoss, Rattigan?" he asked.

Rattigan stared. "I sure do. Thought it was in my barn this minute. What's it doin' here?"

"That's what we aim to find out," Pete came back.

He explained about the stampeded horse. "Where you been the past couple hours or so, Rattigan?" he demanded.

"I been where a man'd be expected to be at this hour—in bed."

"Can you prove it?"

"If I got to prove everything I say," was Rattigan's answer, "I might as well give up right now. But I s'pose my wife could bear me out. She sleeps in the room next to mine. Prob'ly she heard me when I come in."

Pete's shrewd glance held the other man's. Rattigan looked honest. He certainly seemed as much shocked over the death of Peters as at the trouble he found himself in. But that might be just acting.

"Say, what the hell is all this?" Rattigan flared out again. "How do I know what's back of all this devilment around here? Didn't I receive a threatenin' note myself?"

"You got the note?"

"I ain't, as a matter o' fact. I ain't one to be afraid o' such things. Fact is, I don't even let such things annoy me. I thrust the note into my fireplace an' burned it."

Pete was thoughtful for a moment. Could Rattigan have faked a note to himself? Could he have lied about having received the threatening note?

But Rattigan's next statement was his most convincing one. "Say, sheriff," he said, "if I was doin' any funny business,

I sure wouldn't used my *own* hoss."

Pete admitted the probability of this. Yet might not Rattigan have used that horse if he thought no one in town knew it belonged to him? It was, by his own admission, a newly bought horse. Only Lindstrom had recalled seeing it in Rattigan's possession.

"How did you happen to have a hoss with a Circle Cross brand on it?" Pete inquired.

"Why not? I've bought hosses with a dozen different brands. I bought this one the other day from Blind John Blake, the hoss trader."

"Where does this Blake live?"

"Quite a piece out in the country. You couldn't make it much 'fore dawn."

Rattigan snapped his fingers impatiently. "Ain't I havin' enough trouble without this, sheriff? Threatenin' letters! My stagecoach disappearin' from the face o' the earth! A passenger an' two employees disappearin'! Gold that was in the boot o' the stage missin', an' me liable!"

"This is an investigation, not an accusation, Rattigan," Pete said. "I ain't sayin' you're guilty."

"Am I under arrest?"

"No. Not for the present, anyhow. I'll check up with that hoss trader, Blake, to-morrow."

Pete allowed Rattigan to go. He knew that, guilty or not,, Rattigan would make no atempt to skip the country. All that would be too simple. This case was much more knotty, much more involved, than that.

NEXT morning, Pete Rice made inquiries about Blake. The blind trader lived several miles out of town on a horse ranch. Pete took Teeny and Misery with him, for Blake's place was not far from the stage route.

The lawmen could kill two birds with the one stone—see Blake, and be close to action if there were any further irregularities along the stage route.

Shorty Dunne, the Rangerville deputy, accompanied the Buzzard Gap trio.

During the ride, Pete learned much about "Blind John" Blake. Despite Blake's affliction, Shorty explained, he was a shrewd trader. Although he could not see, his other faculties had been sharpened. He would pass his hands over a horse, examine it from pastern to fetlocks. He would listen carefully for any sign of the heaves.

When finally, the lawmen turned into the driveway of the horse ranch, Blake himself was seen talking to his hired man, who was carrying a bucket from the house to the feed barn.

"Howdy, John!" Shorty Dunne called out.

Blake turned. "That voice sounds familiar. That's you, Shorty Dunne, ain't it?"

The lawmen rode up. "That's me, all right, John," Shorty said.

Pete and his assistants dismounted. The sheriff was studying the horse trader.

Blake was a man of thirty-eight or forty. He had black hair, a lean, dark-skinned face. A scar, which might have come from a bullet crease, ran from his temple down across the bridge of his rather strong nose. It was snow-white, sharply-accentuated against the acorn-brown skin.

Blake's eyes stared blankly at the spot where Rangerville's deputy stood. "One o' my boys was tellin' me some hombre took a shot at you the other night, Shorty," he said.

"Oh, part o' my business," Shorty replied. "I'll live through it. John, this is Sheriff Pistol Pete Rice. He's in Rangerville to take charge o' things. These men is his deputies, Teeny Butler an' Misery Hicks."

The trader's odd-looking eyes stared straight ahead. "I've wanted to meet you gents for a long time. I hope you get them killers."

"By jaspers!" Misery exclaimed. "We sure aim to do that!"

Pete explained the reason for his visit. As he talked, the bright sun beat down upon the group. It shone upon the polished-silver badge on Pete's vest. Darting rays of light reflected back with blazing fire.

Pete was still studying that dark face in front of him. The sheriff shifted his position slightly. A ray of light shot around, passed across Blake's face. The tiny spot of radiance flickered up and down. It rested with strange directness on the trader's staring eyes.

Suddenly Blake turned away, toward the house. "Let's go in an' have a talk, boys," he suggested.

There was a strange expression on the sheriff's gaunt face. He caught up with Blake, walked beside him. Again his keen gaze raked Blake's countenance, studied the odd, dark eyes.

"So this is Blind John Blake, is it?" Pete Rice thought to himself.

CHAPTER VII.

"GOLD! PLENTY O' GOLD!"

BLAKE'S story was simple enough. He was always trading horses. He had secured one from Brainstedt, who had owned the Circle Cross spread. Later, he had run into Tom Rattigan, who was also interested in horseflesh. He had sold Rattigan the rangy bay. Blake had netted twenty dollars on the deal.

The sheriff and deputies had mid-day dinner at the horse trader's house. It was well after one o'clock when they walked out to get their horses for the return ride to Rangerville.

"Anything I can do to help you boys, let me know," Blake said glibly, as the lawmen were about to mount. "I can't see, but I manage to do pretty well tradin' hosses, an' maybe I won't be as useless as you think, if you call on me."

"Thanks, Mr. Blake," Pete said. Again his shrewd glance flicked over the trader's face. "We may call on you."

There was the sound of pounding and hammering in the barnyard back of the feed barn.

Pete saw Blake's body go tense. The trader's dark face was tinged with an expression of annoyance. Then Blake smiled, and put out his hand.

"Well, hope to see you boys again soon," he said graciously. "Remember, if I can be of any help——"

Again came that sound of pounding, and finally a noise as of light wood being rent.

Pete Rice went to the edge of the barn, looked back to where the noise was coming from. He was astounded to see a little old man trying to crawl out through the slide door of a hen-house. The shriveled little body was wedged between the sides of the opening.

Pete ran over, managed to pull the old man out into the open.

"What's the matter, old-timer?" he asked.

The man stood up. The top of his head came about to Pete's badge. His body was bent, and very thin. There was a bad welt across his face, and his scant white hair was matted with dried blood. Saliva drooled from his mouth and was lost in the whitish stubble on his chin.

"What was you doin' in there, old-timer?" Pete asked. He looked at the old man's faded blue eyes. There was no light of reason there.

The old man did not answer the question. Pete repeated it.

"I know where there's gold," the old man driveled. "Gold! Plenty o' gold!"

Pete's eyes grew wide. Gold! Had he stumbled across something important? There had been gold in the boot of the missing stagecoach. Could this old man somehow be tied up in the mystery that was setting Rangerville and

the surrounding country by the ears? Or was this some demented old miser mouthing meaningless phrases?

The sheriff turned to Blake. Blake fidgeted just a trifle.

"Who's this old bird?" Pete inquired of the horse trader.

Blake laughed. "Don't forget I don't see anything when I look in his direction," he said. "I don't think I ever heard his voice before. What does he look like?"

Pete described the old man. "He came out of your hen-house, Blake," he said.

Blake laughed again. "He wouldn't be the first chicken thief seen around here. I reckon I'll give up keepin' hens—to go into other folks' gullets."

Again Pete questioned the odd-looking old man. "Have you been tryin' to steal chickens in broad daylight, old-timer?" he asked. "Come on. Let's have your name?"

The old man continued to stare blankly. "Where's Hoyle?" he drooled. "Me an' Hoyle's got track o' more gold than you ever seen, younker!"

Pete was conscious of a feeling of disappointment. More gold than he had ever seen! Then the old man could not be prattling about the gold in the boot of the missing stagecoach. That shipment of gold would be worth little more than a couple of thousand dollars.

"Where's all this gold?" Pete asked.

The old man went into cackling laughter. "Gold!" he said. "Me an' Hoyle."

Childlike, he touched Pete Rice's shining sheriff's badge. "That's silver," he said. He held his sides. His shriveled body shook. There was a demoniac note in his laughter. "Silver! Huh! No good! I know where there's gold!"

"He must be some old ranny gone loco from livin' alone," Blake ventured. "I s'pose I can't prove he was tryin' to steal my hens. He ain't got any on him, has he?"

"No," Pete answered. There was a queer expression in Pete's eyes. That last was a wholly unnecessary question, coming from a man whose faculties were as keen as Blake's. If the man had been carrying hens, the fowls would have clucked or squawked.

"Then I won't prosecute the poor old duffer," Blake said. He turned in the direction of the old man. "You get off my property. Get back where you belong. Don't be comin' around here after my hens."

"Hens?" the old man echoed. "The hens that laid the golden eggs?" Once more he went off into laughter.

Pete was examining the bruise across the old man's head. "This poor old hombre's been slugged pretty hard by some one," he said. "There must be some concussion o' the brain; maybe even a slight fracture. That's what drove him loco. I reckon I better take him into town for medical attention."

He watched the effect of his words on Blake. The latter's face showed no expression.

"All right, sheriff," he said finally. "I'll let you take an extra hoss."

Teeny walked over to the corral, roped an extra horse. Blake showed him where the saddles and bridles hung on pegs.

"It might be a hard jaunt for the old boy into town," Blake said. "I could keep him here, if you like; might do him more good."

"He needs a doctor," was Pete's decision. "Well, thanks for the hoss, Blake. I'll see it's returned."

"Oh, that's all right," Blake said.

His voice was pleasant. But there was an odd gleam in those queer-looking dark eyes of his.

WHEN the lawmen started back for Rangerville toward two o'clock, the old man rode with them. He sat the horse awkwardly. It was obvious that he was no ex-puncher or cattleman.

Misery kneed his scrawny roan over beside Sonny. The little barber-deputy had a highly developed bump of curiosity.

"Got any ideas, boss?" he asked Pete.

The sheriff did not answer the question directly. "Misery, the hombre that says the least, is got the least to deny later," he replied. "Better lead the poor old codger's hoss. He's like to fall off it an' hurt his head worse."

Repeatedly during the ride, Pete tried to engage the old man in conversation. But his questions did not register in the old man's brain. He prattled of gold, and of a man named Hoyle.

Pete studied him. His hands were heavy for such a small man, and the palms were cushioned with a thick callous. A miner, Pete decided; possibly an old prospector who had been looking for gold for years and was now gabbling of the fortune he could never find.

The old man's suit of clothes interested him, too. The coat was filthy. It was caked with blood and dirt. There was a big rent in the left side. The trousers were frayed at the bottoms. And yet Pete could see that this was not an ordinary suit of "store-clothes" that the old man was wearing. That suit had been tailor-made.

An idea flashed through Petes brain. The tailors in Buzzard Gap and surrounding towns usually sewed their firm name and the name of their customer in any suit they made to order.

Pete halted the cavalcade for a moment, rode close to the old man, unbuttoned the latter's coat.

The rent in the side of the garment had torn out the tailor's name in the inside pocket. But just below it, fashioned in thread, was another name. Pete read the script:

im Weaver

"This must be *his* name," the sheriff remarked to his men. "First part's ripped off. If that's his suit, his name must be Weaver. Maybe Jim, or Sim, or Tim. We might learn somethin' by inquirin' at the tailor shops around the county."

He patted the old man on the back. "Howdy, Weaver," he said heartily. "Your name's Weaver, ain't it, old-timer?"

For just a second, a look of sanity returned to the old man's eyes. "You know me?" he asked. Then the light of reason died out like a fading ember in a grate. "You don't know me," he drooled. "You ain't Walt Hoyle. You don't know where there's any gold."

He laughed again, louder than ever this time.

But Pete Rice was not discouraged. "We'll turn him over to the doc in town," he remarked to his deputies. "I got a hunch that when he's treated a while, he might be able to tell us somethin' interestin'."

"By jaspers!" Misery Hicks exclaimed. "I got the same idea. When we first heard that hammerin' an' poundin', I noticed that——"

Pete silenced Misery with a glance. "See if we can't make a little better time, boys," the sheriff cut in.

PETE knew that Shorty Dunne, the Rangerville deputy, was as game as he could ask. But Shorty was known to be talkative. The sheriff did not want Misery voicing any theories.

Pete himself had noticed Blake's queer attitude when that pounding had started. But often the sheriff of Buzzard Gap kept theories strictly to himself, from the start of a case to its conclusion. Frequently he did not even take Misery or Teeny into his confidence, although he trusted them implicitly.

In spite of Pete's suggestion to try to make better time, the trip was being made slowly. Misery had to lead the demented old man's horse. The in-

jured Shorty Dunne, too, was feeling the effects of the ride.

The shadows were lengthening as the tall stone guardian of the Ten Mile Water Hole loomed ahead.

"Blake seems a right pleasant hombre," the sheriff remarked to Shorty Dunne.

Dunne nodded. "Sure is, Pete. A square-shooter." He grinned. "Except maybe on a hoss deal. A feller'd need about six pairs o' specs to keep up with him then."

"How'd he get blinded?" Pete wanted to know.

"Can't tell you. I got an idea it was from a bullet crease. All I know is that he was blind when he first took up that land two-three year ago."

"Don't know where he's from, original?"

"Nope. I don't ask questions like that from citizens as behave 'emselves."

"Pretty good rule," Pete admitted.

The water hole was reached. The horses were watered. All the riders except Teeny Butler and the old man cupped up drinks in their hands. Teeny preferred a bracer from his flask of cold sassafras tea.

The old man ran his hands through the cool water. "Gold!" he mumbled. "Liquid gold!"

Cinches were tightened. The old man was lifted back into the saddle. The riders resumed their way along the final stretch into Rangerville.

Pete's keen gaze was leveled at the road. There were no fresh wheel-marks. It was evident that the Peters Line stagecoach had not passed this point as yet on its way to Rangerville.

"The Peters stage 'ud be about due along here this time, wouldn't it, Shorty?" he asked the Rangerville deputy.

Shorty looked up at the lowering sun. "Just about. I understand there won't be no more Peters stages runnin' after to-day—that is, until old Horace is buried."

He shook his head. "I just can't get any idea o' who'd drill poor Horace Peters," he remarked. "Old Horace didn't have an enemy in the world."

"Maybe not—that is, not that he knew of," Pete conceded. "But it's been my experience that a man that lived as long as Peters, especially a business man, that didn't have at least a couple of enemies, wouldn't have so many friends. Maybe——"

Suddenly all reined in their horses sharply. There were shots from the rear. They seemed to come from the left fork, back beyond the water hole—the fork that led to Soda Springs.

"Quick, men!" Pete whipped out. "It may be somethin' to do with the stage!"

PETE spurred Sonny. The beautifull sorrel seemed to sprout wings and soar. His hoofs beat a rhythmic tattoo on the hard road. He was putting every ounce of speed into his stride.

Teeny kept up to within a few lengths. Shorty Dunne brought up the rear.

Sonny reached the junction of the roads fifty yards in advance. Pete swung his head into the fork leading to Soda Springs. Three more shots racked out. They sounded closer.

Pete sank the spurs into Sonny. The sheriff knew that this was the route that the Peters Stage Line took. Were the bandits after the Peters Stage Line, too?

It was a mad, dangerous race, with the sounds of shooting coming closer and closer. Then suddenly it stopped, as suddenly as it had started.

But a new noise became apparent. It was a low, heavy rumbling, and the pounding of horses' hoofs on the rocky road.

Pete reined in Sonny. The road grew

narrower. It shelved down sharply on either side.

As he reined in, Pete's eyes widened. A hard, grim look made his face seem like something sculptured in stone. One hand hovered like a poised hawk above the silver-inlaid .45 in his right holster.

Coming around the turn, outlined in the soft blue of the Arizona sky, was the speeding bulk of the stagecoach out of Soda Springs—the Peters Line coach. It swung and slithered back and forth across the road. The body of the coach rocked from side to side. The wheels skidded to within inches of the shelving rock at the side of the road.

On the box the driver sat with his right hand clutching a smoking revolver while his left clutched the reins.

A sprawled figure was draped across the seat beside him. The head hung oddly loose. It swayed with the wild motion of the stage.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE END OF BLINK WATSON.

FOR just a second, Pistol Pete Rice sat spellbound on the back of Sonny. The sight ahead of him gripped his nerves in a cold, tense grasp. Then he had whirled Sonny, and was timing the action of the sorrel along the road toward the junction.

That coach had to be stopped before it reached the junction. There was a sharp turn there, with a steep drop onto rock at either side.

Shorty Dunne and Teeny imitated Pete's action. They whirled their horses, rode ahead of the speeding, swaying coach.

Pete looked back over his shoulder. The stagecoach horses seemed frenzied. Their mouths were wide open; their nostrils flared red.

The driver was using poor judgment. He had dropped his .45, and his long black whip curled around the horses' flanks. The team leaped ahead as though some hand of terror clutched at their sweat-streaked bodies. The driver must know of the possible danger ahead, at the turn. But he was fleeing from some actual danger behind.

Pete timed Sonny's stride. He held down the sorrel. The stagecoach team drew closer.

Teeny Butler had caught the idea. He neckreined his blood-bay horse to the other side of the road, held it in, spurred it into action as the team almost came abreast. The big deputy's hand went out for the bridle of one of the horses as Pete Rice clutched the bridle of the other.

Both lawmen let their mounts hang back, sawed away at the bridles of the stagecoach horses.

The stage driver had lost his feeling of terror. He jerked the leather ribbons. There was a squealing of brakes. The stagecoach horses slowed down suddenly, almost went to their haunches. The big, lumbering stage skidded to a halt. The sharp turn was about eighteen feet ahead.

"How far was them bandits back from here?" Pete asked the driver. He had recognized the man as a resident of Soda Springs who occasionally came into Buzzard Gap, the county seat, to get drunk.

"Oh, about half a mile. There was about six of 'em, but we managed to get away. Reckon we're rid of 'em."

"Well, maybe they ain't rid of us!" Pete snapped.

He looked back over his shoulder. Little Misery Hicks—always eager to be in the thick of any fight—was slowly riding along and leading the demented man's horse toward the stage. Pete had ordered the little barber-deputy not to lose sight of his charge for a moment. This demented man—Weaver, if that was his name—might prove a big element in the unraveling of this unusual case.

Pete rode alongside of the stage,

peered through the door of the coach. A lone passenger was seated inside. He was quietly cleaning and reloading his .45. His lean, brown face split into a line of white as he showed his teeth in a smile.

"You seem to be the sheriff," he said. His gray eyes swept over Pete's badge. "Pleased to meet you. You folks out here make it interesting for a stranger, anyhow," he concluded with another grin.

Pete grinned back. A cool, collected customer, this.

The features were keen, but Pete would have wagered that this man was honest, though possibly sharp in a business deal. The face was that of an outdoor man. But Pete, as he gripped the extended hand of the passenger, noted that the palm was soft. This man did not do manual labor.

"You say you're a stranger in these parts?" he asked.

"From Chicago—and points East. Hoyle's the name. Yes sir, Walter C. Hoyle."

Pete's eyes widened. Walter C. Hoyle! And the demented man in charge of Misery Hicks had been babbling about a man named *Walt Hoyle!* There might be something here after all!

MEANWHILE, however, the bandits were geting away, probably might have made their getaway by this time, in fact. Pete motioned for Misery to ride up. Misery did so.

"Was there any gold in the boot o' the coach?" Pete asked the driver.

"Plenty!" was the answer. "Them fellers knowed it. That's what they was after."

Pete Rice had no intention of leaving the stagecoach unguarded to a surprise attack of the bandits. As Misery rode up with his charge, Pete organized the situation quickly.

"You guard the coach," he ordered Shorty Dunne. "You an' the driver an' this passenger can take care o' things, I reckon. If we hear any shots, we'll lope back pronto. Meanwhile, we'll see if we can trace them bandits."

He nodded to Teeny and Misery. The three lawmen galloped up the road.

Pete was wary. There were cottonwoods on one side, a line of high boulders on the other. But the bandits had disappeared. The trail showed that they had ridden cross-country to the north.

About three hundred yards to the north was a thick growth of stirrup-high chaparral, backed by a large grove of pines.

Pete Rice was courageous—but he was not foolhardy. He had recognized the note of a high-powered automatic rifle among those shots he had heard. The bandits might be lurking in that chaparral or on the edge of the pine grove. That automatic rifle could bring down himself and his deputies within seconds.

He believed, too, that the death or capture of a few bandits would mean little in the final solution of this case which, in many respects, was the most unusual one of his experience.

He was considering whether to circle around back of the grove with his men and attempt an attack from the rear when Teeny Butler, off at the right of the trail, dismounted from his blood-bay and pulled something out of the brush.

"Well, the folks on the stage sho' got one of 'em!" he called out. "Ah'd sho' say they did! Looka here, Pete."

Pete neckreined Sonny over to the side of the trail.

It was a dead man that Teeny had pulled out of the brush.

Pete looked down at the dead face. The eyes were wide open, but even in death they had a peculiar, droopy expression.

The dead bandit was "Blink" Watson, the big, sullen-looking fellow that Pete had knocked out back of the Rangerville House!

Pete looked at the wound in the left temple. The bullet that had killed Watson had been fired at close range, much closer than any one on the stage-coach would be liable to be.

The sheriff's eyes had a peculiar expression as he turned over the form and noted that the bullet had gone clear through Watson's skull. The tip of it had come out on the other side.

It was a grisly job, but Pete managed to extract the bullet. He examined it carefully.

It was a .44 bullet.

The guard on the stage had carried a shotgun. The driver had toted a .45. So had the cool, collected passenger who called himself Walter C. Hoyle.

The sheriff made a closer examination of the bullet. No doubt that Watson had been killed with a .44.

More mystery!

THE Buzzard Gap trio started back toward the stage with the body of Blink Watson. There was little, if any, use in trailing the rest of the bandits.

They had made an attempt to hold up the Peters stage, had been foiled by the sudden appearance of Pete and his men, and had called it a day. They had fled, and must have a good start by this time.

Pete Rice was undecided whether or not to try to trail them. The sheriff was one of the best trackers in Arizona. But first he wanted to question Hoyle, the passenger in the coach.

The demented man had babbled of a "Walt Hoyle." The passenger might be the man. He could probably explain much; could possibly turn up a clew that would solve the mystery of the terror happenings in the vicinity of Rangerville.

Back at the stage, Pete questioned the driver again. There was something about that driver which excited Pete's suspicion. The man's eyes were shifty.

"Where did them hombres jump you first, driver?" the sheriff asked.

"A couple o' miles back. We was bowlin' along right smart. I was talkin' with old Bronson——" He nodded to the dead man on the seat beside him. Next second, Bronson was a corpse. I don't know how I managed to get through, but I sure made them hosses step."

"You kept firin' back at 'em?"

"Now an' then. I seen that feller go down." He motioned toward the body of Blink Watson.

"You're sure your shot got him?"

"Plumb sure."

Pete's lip flattened cynically. "That hog-leg you got's a .45, ain't it?"

"That's right."

Pete said nothing about the .44 bullet in the body of Watson. But the driver flared up. "Why, what's eatin' you, sheriff?" His bronze face reddened. "Why you askin' me if I got a .45?"

"Forget it—for now, anyhow!" Pete snapped.

He was certain now that his suspicion of the driver had been warranted. He would question Hoyle, ride back to town with the coach, and then grill the driver.

He stood up in the stirrups to examine the dead man on the box. The guard was apparently about forty years old. His gray-black hair was tinged with crimson from a bullet wound in his forehead. The dead hand still clutched a Colt.

The shot that had killed him had torn him around into a strained, grotesque position. His shotgun lay jammed beneath his inert body.

"You boys is ridin' in with us, sheriff?" the driver asked.

Pete nodded. "Yep. Don't reckon there'll be any more trouble. Once you reach Placer, the route's too settled for

them bandits to try any monkey business. But we'll accompany the stage in, anyhow."

"All right."

The driver lifted one arm. The lash of his black whip curled out.

Boom!

Far up on the side of the canyon to the right there was a puff of smoke. A rifle bullet spatted against a rock, inches from where the demented old man was standing.

The old fellow seemed oblivious to his danger. He never moved a muscle, just stood there looking blankly into the lowering sun.

Another puff of smoke, another distant report, another bullet that spatted back of the old man.

Pete was racing to the old man's side. For some reason, the bandits, holed up along the side of the canyon, were trying to get that demented old man. Pete struck the old fellow like a football tackle, bore him to the ground, dragged him behind a boulder.

Again the rifle on the side of the canyon boomed. The stage driver threw up his hands. His whip slid from one of them.

There was a heavy spat, as of a stone dropping into thick mud.

The driver's body had slipped from the box to the road. It lay there, oddly crumpled, motionless!

CHAPTER IX.

PURSUIT.

TEENY, Misery and Shorty Dunne had spurred their mounts to comparative safety back of the thicket at the left side of the road.

Pete, in the shelter of a tall boulder, held down the demented old man, who kicked and screamed like an unruly child. The passenger remained inside the coach.

Pete whistled to Sonny, called the sorrel to shelter. Then the sheriff grabbed his lariat from the saddle-strap, made a short cast. The loop dropped over the head of the near horse of the team.

"Giddap!" Pete yelled.

The horses started. Pulling on the rope, Pete guided the team off the road and into the shelter of the thicket. Another rifle report came from the side of the canyon. The bullet flattened against one of the rear wheels of the coach.

Screened by the scrub, Pete peered out and upward. "Keep under cover, men!" he called out.

He knew what havoc an automatic rifle could wreak if any heads were shown. Their .45s had not a fraction of the range of that sniper's weapon.

Many questions were knotted in the sheriff's mind. Why should the bandits have tried to kill that demented old man? The answer must be that the old man had something important to tell. The bandits wanted to silence him forever. Failing that, they had killed the driver, who undoubtedly had been in with them and whom they did not fully trust.

Could the supposed "blind" John Blake be back of this? For Pete had suspected from the first that Blake was *not* blind. Blake had turned his head when that ray of light from the sheriff's badge had passed across his vision.

Was Blake a crook, a killer? Or was he posing as a blind man for more petty reasons?—in order to get the better of horse-trading deals, for instance.

Pete had a pretty good idea that the demented man had not been a mere chicken thief. The old man possibly had been held a prisoner on the property of John Blake. Blake had tried to keep him there, had said he would take care of his injuries. But when Pete had insisted that the man needed medical attention, Blake was too good an actor to prove sullen.

He had seemed gracious, had offered

an extra horse to provide the demented man with a mount into Rangerville. Had he planned then to have the man sniped at and killed before he could reach town?

If that man up on the side of the canyon could be captured, perhaps he could tell things which were making this mystery one of the knottiest Pistol Pete Rice had ever tackled.

"Shorty!"

Pete's voice called across the verdure.

"What is it, sheriff?"

"Reckon me an' my deputies'll go after that c'ote up on the side o' the canyon. Could you take the stage into Rangerville?"

"Sure I could. I could drive with one arm."

"All right. Start out now." Pete's face was granite-firm. His gray eyes were twin chips of coldness. His jaws worked on his wad of chewing gum.

"I'll take Misery an' Teeny. We may have a bigger job than we think. But the only way to meet gunfire is with gunfire."

The sheriff's hawklike gaze raked the wide expanse of canyon wall again. There was movement up there. The sniper was evidently leaving.

"That ranny's givin' up his target practice," Pete announced. "Reckon it's time we started ours. Come on, Shorty."

Quickly he got Shorty Dunne on the box of the stage. The bodies of Blink Watson and the driver were loaded in with the dead shotgun guard. The passenger volunteered to take charge of the demented old man.

The stage, with its odd cargo, rumbled toward Rangerville. Then Pete and his deputies started to ride in the direction of the canyon.

PETE set a fast pace with Sonny. The sorrel leaped ahead as though blasted from a canyon.

Above, there was nothing but the barren face of the canyon wall. The sniper had departed. But Pete believed he could be tracked and overtaken.

There was nobody in sight as the trio gained the top of the rim. The land stretched away to the east, and was almost unbroken by trees or other vegetation in that direction, but to the north, thickets were scattered here and there. Pete spurred Sonny, warily led the way northward.

The lawmen galloped through a cottonwood grove. The trail showed fresh hoofprints. And on the other side of the grove, almost out of sight but reappearing occasionally as they rode through a sparsely-treed section, were the figures of three horsemen.

Pete spurred Sonny again. The sorrel's hoofs flashed in the afternoon sunlight. Misery and Teeny kept within a few lengths to the rear.

The lawmen shot across the almost barren plateau. They reached the trees. The trees shot past. The fleeing riders had reappeared again. Their horses were apparently badly winded, and tiring. They turned, and gauged the distance of the pursuing lawmen. Then they spurred madly on.

The trail swooped downward, then swung upward again in a steep ascent. But Sonny took the incline in his stride. Teeny's rugged blood-bay was getting its second wind. Misery's scrawny roan was breathing hard, but gamely kept in motion.

Pete and his deputies were slowly gaining on their quarry. The space between the racing horses steadily diminished.

The trail dipped again. Pete sent Sonny along with a slack rein. His right hand flashed for his .45 as he approached a turn in the trail. It was time for fireworks. He had no intention of shooting the fugitives in the back. But a few shots placed close might cause them to surrender or make a fight of it.

He made the turn, drew his .45 from his holster.

There was a grove of cottonwoods about two hundred yards ahead and to the right. It seemed that the fugitives must have taken shelter there. There was no other shelter.

Pete glanced back over his shoulder, yelled to his deputies as they rocketed around the turn.

He pointed in the direction of the cottonwoods. "We'll surround 'em!" he yelled.

Teeny Butler nodded, and spurred his blood-bay. The hoofs of the three horses beat out a rapid tempo of speed against the rocky trail.

Pete drew up as he reached the cottonwoods. But there were no hoofprints in the soft soil. The fugitives could not have come this way. But which way had they gone? They had mysteriously dropped out of sight!

Teeny and Misery reined in sharply. "What's the matter, boss?" Misery called out.

"Everything!" Pete replied. "Them hombres was well in sight before I came to the last turn. I reckoned it was a matter o' minutes. I spurred Sonny, made the turn; there was no other shelter, an' naturally I thought they'd holed up here in the woods. But you can see for yourself—no tracks here."

"They disappeared as complete as that stagecoach did," Misery Hicks remarked.

Pete's eyes gleamed. Like the stagecoach! It was true. If these riders could be traced, perhaps the missing stagecoach could be traced, also!

THE three lawmen doubled back along the trail. There was no sign of human life. Nothing but the blank walls on both sides. At the far end, one of the walls sloped down to meet the trail.

Looking over the almost sheer drop, Pete could see the winding road from which they had recently come. It curved and twisted like a huge snake between hills and canyons. Off in the distance, almost curtained by bluish haze, was the stage-terminal town of Wilcey Center.

Pete Rice dismounted, walked to where the slope was more gradual and where earth clung to giant boulders. The latter were scattered about as though hurled by some giant hand wrathfully aroused. But there were no hoofmarks in the vicinity, no footprints.

The lawmen continued the search until almost dusk. Then, dolefully, they headed their mounts back toward the stage road.

As they swung around a turn from which they could see the granite spire guarding the Ten Mile Water Hole, Misery pointed ahead.

"Look, boss! Wonder if that could be one of 'em!"

Pete looked down at a lone rider, cutting toward the stage road from the direction of the town of Red Mesa.

"I don't reckon so," Pete answered. "But that hombre sure is in a hurry, ain't he?"

And the hombre *was* in a hurry. He was tearing along at breakneck speed.

"Come on, boys!" Pete yelled. "It sure means somethin'. We can make the junction near the water hole about as quick as he can, I reckon."

The sheriff gave Sonny his head. Teeny and Misery used their spurs. The trio made the junction above the water hole a hundred yards ahead of the rider galloping in madly from the Red Mesa road.

Pete put up his hand. He recognized the rider as a man named Mason, a storekeeper in the town of Red Mesa.

"What's up, Mason?" the sheriff yelled.

"Hell to pay! The bank at Red Mesa!"

"What about it? Has it been robbed?"

"Not yet." Mason was turning his horse back toward Red Mesa. "I was goin' to Rangerville for more men. Bandits are swoopin' down on it to-night! They're gettin' brassy, sheriff. They sent Lasso Davis, the bank president, a threatenin' note. He thinks they mean business."

Pete sent Sonny abreast of the storekeeper's horse.

He was wondering if this threatened bank robbery had anything to do with the stagecoach mystery. At any rate, it was his duty to help guard the bank.

His horse took the lead as he and Mason and the deputies galloped toward the little cattle town.

CHAPTER X.

AT THE MESA.

THE town of Red Mesa was sunk in a deep declivity between a twin range of hills. Once it had actually been a mesa—a plateau—but volcanic disturbances had sliced through the high tableland so that the town did not live up to the name which its original Mexican settlers had given it.

To the east and west extended winding outrails. To the north was a towering row of granite cliffs, while a long and rolling range of foothills completed the compass at the south.

The nearest town—Silver Creek—was directly across the northern range of mountains, a distance of about five miles as the crow flies. To travel there from Red Mesa, however, one had to follow a circuitous route which lengthened the traveling time by a good half hour.

The main street followed the natural sweep of the canyon in which the village nestled. Stores lined either side of the street for about two hundred yards, then gave way to small dwellings which clung close to the canyon wall. The Red Mesa bank was a small structure, but the institution was a most important one to the town.

The main street was almost deserted when Pete and his companions rode along it. It was already dusk—close to seven o'clock. The riders dismounted before the square building with the weather-beaten, paint-peeled sign reading:

STOCKMEN'S TRI-CITY BANK

A group of cattlemen and storekeepers had gathered inside.

Pete led his deputies into the building and nodded to a tall, white-haired man—old "Lasso" Davis, a retired cattleman and now the president of the bank.

"Somethin' queer goin' on, Lasso?"

"Hello, sheriff! Yep, mighty queer. Sounds almost loco. Well, anyhow, this afternoon I get a letter sayin' my bank's goin' to be robbed to-night!"

"Some one notifyin' you in advance?"

"Exactly. Sounds right funny, but that's just what it said. You know, there was a case like that over in Gila County, sheriff. Them bank robbers got so brassy that they notified the bank in advance. Sort of a threat. If the bank didn't make it easy for them crooks, they seen to it that there was plenty o' killin'."

Pete nodded. He had heard of that case over in Gila County. But that had been a detached incident—one case in a thousand. It did not seem likely that bank robbers would be trying it again in Trinchera County.

"I'm kind o' takin' it seriously," old Lasso Davis went on, "because the sender o' the note must be acquainted with my habits. I reckon you know that the Tri-City Bank has a branch in Silver Creek an' another in Wilcey Center. I split up my time among the three banks. Spend two days in each. But the sender o' that note must have had inside information that I was comin'

here to-night. The note was addressed to me here."

"Let's see the note."

Davis went to his desk and took a crumpled sheet of paper from beneath a heavy weight. "It was slipped onto my desk when I walked over to speak to the teller," he said.

Pete read the note:

Lasso Davis—To-night yure bank will be robbed at 7 oclock. Dont try to stop us. Therell be a lot more bludshed if you do. Use yure head and save lives.

The writing was an illiterate scrawl—which might mean nothing at all. The misspelled words, too, might have been put in as a blind.

Lasso Davis smiled at Pete. "Anyhow, sheriff," he said, "I sure feel a heap better with you an' your deputies here. We're peaceable folks over here in Red Mesa. We ain't had much experience holdin' off bank robbers. Will you wait around a while, an' sort o' lead us if it happens?"

Pete chewed his gum thoughtfully for a few seconds. "Sure thing. But this don't sound quite right to me. Anyhow, we'll be ready—just in case."

He turned back to his deputies. "Teeny, you get about half dozen o' these men an' take up a stand over there."

The sheriff pointed to a jog at the entrance of the building. "I'll join you there in a minute or two."

He turned to Misery. "You take the rest o' the men an' get back toward the vault, Misery. That vault ain't any too strong, an' I reckon dynamite could make quick work of it. If them hombres come, an' they get by us, or drill us—you an' your men shoot to kill. We got to break up any attempt by this, so that it'll be a lesson for any bank robbers in the future."

Pete's hand still clutched the note. His eyes swept over it again.

"I can't quite take this for just what it says, Lasso," he told the white-haired bank president. "Get this wordin'."

He pointed to the scrawled writing. "There's trickery here somewhere. It don't just say that *this* bank'll be robbed, does it?"

"What do you mean?" Lasso asked.

"I mean that it says *your* bank'll be robbed. That might mean your bank in Wilcey Center, or the one in Silver Creek. If you ask me, Lasso, it looks like funny doin's over at the Creek."

Pete chewed his gum a few seconds, studied the note again. "You see, you've sent riders out to all the little settlements near here an' got riders to lope in here to give protection to the Red Mesa bank."

Lasso Davis nodded. He was beginning to see the point.

"I don't reckon," Pete went on, "that the Wilcey Center bank'll be touched, because there's a fair on over at the Center to-day. There'll be a swarm o' ranchers an' cowhands in town. But I'll bet there won't be a corporal's guard left over in Silver Creek, in case my hunch is right about the bank over there. What I'd suggest is that some of us get started pronto toward Silver Creek, in case——"

He broke off as there was a furious tattoo of hoofs along the main street, coming from the Silver Creek side of town.

Several tense-nerved men ran out of the bank. "Reckon this is them comin', sheriff?" some one asked. "You just tell us where to stand an'——"

Pete silenced the speaker with a gesture. He stood there like a carven statue. "That's just one hoss," he said. "No hoofbeats back of it. Nope, this ain't the robbers."

THE furious tattoo of hoofbeats on the hard roadbed came closer. The rider was draining every last ounce of speed from his mount. His fast-moving form became more dis-

tinct in the evening light.

Like a whirlwind he swept up to the group in front of the bank and dismounted. His right arm hung limply at his side. His sleeve was blood-streaked.

He staggered toward Lasso Davis, and then, seeing Pete Rice's lanky form, turned to the sheriff.

"Get help to Silver Creek!" he said. "Trouble! I got away. They chased me half a mile—an' winged me."

"Bank robbers?" Pete asked.

The man nodded. "The citizens are inside the bank. They was holdin' 'em off all right when I got away. But they can't hold out long——"

His voice trailed away. He swayed, and started to keel over.

Pete Rice caught him. "Get this man to a doctor—quick!" he yelled. "Teeny! Take this group o' men!" He motioned to the number he had selected to take up a stand outside the Red Mesa bank. "Get started to Silver Creek! You gents'll have to use your spurs. See that you got plenty of ammunition. Don't go till you get it. I'll follow right on an' overtake you."

"O. K., boss." Teeny was already running for his big blood-bay. Misery Hicks started to follow him.

"Wait a minute, Misery!" Pete snapped.

He drew the little barber-deputy aside. "Misery, I don't like the looks o' this. The Silver Creek bank was left almost unprotected, and the robbers must be havin' an easy time of it. Now, we don't want *this* bank left unprotected. Get it?"

Misery's blue eyes crackled. "I get it, boss. You want me to stay here?"

Pete nodded. "Just in case. Organize a bunch o' these men together. Some of 'em ain't got hosses. They can't ride over to Silver Creek. But they got guns. They can shoot. You do your best if anything happens. But don't take too many chances. I'll be back here pronto—if we miss them rannies at Silver Creek."

Then Pete was running toward Sonny. He leaped into the saddle. He gave the sorrel his head and soon was overtaking the cavalcade thundering along the trail toward Silver Creek.

DIM shots had been heard from the direction of Silver Creek as the posse neared the town. But when the riders swung into the main street, everything was strangely silent.

Lasso Davis, riding a powerful dappled-gray, managed to get within talking range of Pete Rice.

"Looks like we're too late," he yelled. "Shootin's stopped!"

Pete nodded. The main street was almost in darkness. Several of the main lights had been shot out. The plate-glass window of the largest store lay in bits on the plank sidewalk.

A man ran out of the store. He leveled a .45 at the riders, then suddenly threw the muzzle up. He had seen just in time that these were possemen, not more bank robbers.

The band of riders, Pete in the lead, pounded along the main street. They drew up in front of a silent, shadowy building. A man lay prone before the building. Pete could see that it was a dead citizen of Silver Creek—one of the few who had been in town to help protect the bank.

Nothing could be done for him. So Pete dismounted, leaped over the still form and bounded toward the bank door.

The door was open, swinging wide. Pete ran inside. The possemen swarmed at his heels. Several townsmen who had been terrorized into hiding, had joined them by now.

The bank was in complete darkness. Some one got a lantern, and Pete scratched a match on his boot and touched the flame to the wick of the

lantern, which sputtered and glowed into life.

There was little disorder. A desk had been overturned. One window had been broken. A few papers were cluttered about the floor. The place was silent except for a regular tapping in the direction of one of the two vaults.

Pete ran over to the vault, motioned over his shoulder for Lasso Davis to follow him.

"They've locked some one in that vault, Davis," he said. "You know the combination, don't you?"

For answer, Davis knelt down before the vault. Pete held the lighted lantern so that its rays shone down upon the milled combination knob. With deft fingers, Davis whirled the knob this way and that. Then he turned the handle. The tumblers fell away. The door opened.

In a flash, Pete was inside the vault and was pulling out the limp form of a man. Spot-cord had been wound around the ankles and wrists. A dirty bandanna had been used as a gag.

Pete cut the bonds, tore away the gag. He lashed out quick commands for some of the men to bring water. He threw the water in the man's face, bathed his forehead and wrists, worked his arms back and forth.

The cramped position of the gagged man in the small vault had all but caused suffocation. However, within a moment or two, Barden—cashier of the bank—was able to talk.

When the attack had come, he had seen that he and the handful of citizens could not hold out. He had tried strategy; had appeared to protect the vault in which only about a thousand dollars and some non-negotiable bonds reposed.

The robbers had held him at the point of a gun; had forced him to tell the combination. He had done this, after holding out to the danger point. But his action had delayed the bandits. It had kept them from attacking the second vault, where the real valuables of the bank were kept.

Later, after some delay, they had demanded the combination of this second vault. But Barden had pretended not to know it. Then the bandit leader had rushed into the bank and quickly marshaled his men.

"They seemed in an awful hurry," Barden said between gasps. "But they slugged me, jerked me into the vault, slammed the door an' whirled the knob. I kept kickin' at the door as long as I was able. Wanted to be heard if any help came. Then I reckon I passed out."

Pete had bounded to his feet. "Davis!" he snapped. "Our job is to get back to Red Mesa pronto! Barden says them hombres seemed in an awful hurry. You know why?"

He did not wait for Davis's reply. "They knew that rider got away an' brought the news to Red Mesa. Maybe they even sent that rider, as a stall. They knew we'd hightail it over here—an' thought we'd *leave the Red Mesa bank unprotected!* They're probably close to Red Mesa right now!"

"But we didn't pass 'em on the road," Davis protested. "We——"

"No. We had to take the roundabout way because we couldn't get our horses up that cliff—over the shortcut. But goin' back—downhill—they could take that shortcut. An' that's the way we'll take back now."

He ran out of the bank. "Get ready, men. Back to Red Mesa. Follow me. We're takin' the shortcut down the cliff. If any o' you hombres ain't good hossmen, or ain't got good mounts, take the long way. Rest o' you boys—ready!"

He motioned to a couple of the men, ordered them to take care of Barden, to see that the cashier got to a doctor. Then he was on the back of Sonny, and racing madly toward the shortcut down the cliff.

Teeny Butler's blood-bay pounded in Sonny's wake. Most of the other men of the posse were willing to follow Pete Rice anywhere. The long, racing line of horsemen galloped around the turn. They looked strangely like the curling lash of a whip.

And that lash would crack when Red Mesa was reached—if the horsemen were in time!

CHAPTER XI.

MISERY MAKES A STAND.

THE Irish-blue eyes of little Misery Hicks peered through the gloom. The barber-deputy of Buzzard Gap was stationed just inside the barred front window of the Red Mesa bank. He had organized a group of most of the fighting men left in Red Mesa. And fighting men were the only kind that Misery wanted.

He felt proud that his boss, Pistol Pete Rice, had picked him for this assignment. As he crouched there in the gloom, he was between two minds.

In one way, he didn't want the attack on the bank to take place. For that would mean bloodshed. Some of those fellows inside the bank with him were not experienced in this sort of thing. They might have fighting hearts, but little fighting experience.

On the other hand, Misery almost hoped the attack would happen. For the scrawny little deputy was never happier than when he was in the thick of battle.

It may have been sheer courage; or it may have been egotism. But Misery Hicks somehow could never think of himself as getting killed. That's why—especially when Pete Rice was not around—he frequently took chances that amounted to foolhardiness.

He heard the drumming of hoofs. His blue eyes blazed. "Get ready, fellers," he called to the men inside the bank. "This may be them!"

As a matter of fact, it did prove to be "them." For a spurt of orange-red flame burst from the shadows near the Red Mesa General Store, opposite the bank. The robbers doubtless thought the bank was unprotected.

One of them had put a shot through the store window to create terror. He fired another shot—and guffawed. Then he sank to the sidewalk as flame from Misery's .45 lanced the gloom.

The battle was on.

Guns boomed from the group of bandits. Lead thudded into the wooden framework of the window back of which Misery crouched. Another quick brace of shots came. A spray of shattered glass spattered over Misery. A movement behind him made him turn his head. One of the men inside the bank had crawled up.

"How long you reckon we can hold out, deputy?" he asked. "Will Pete Rice be back in time, you think?"

Misery faced the blurry outline of the other's countenance. He frowned slightly. He had caught the note of nervousness in the man's voice.

"Now, don't worry, hombre," he said. "You just get back where I put you. We won't have much to worry about till they get down the door. They can do that with shotguns—an' I reckon they got 'em with 'em, all right."

He could see that there were plenty of the bandits. Gunfire danced in the alley next to the general store. It was pitch dark within the confines of that alley. Only the flashes revealed that it was occupied.

Some one poked a gun barrel through the glass of one of the bank's side windows. Shots were sprayed into the room. One of the men inside the bank answered, and there was a yowl of pain outside.

Misery grinned. Yes, most of these Red Mesa rannies had their nerve with them, at that!

More shots crashed through the rear window. Bullets snicked against desks

and spatted against one of the vaults.

"Keep under cover, boys!" Misery called back. He realized that the bank was being surrounded. "They can't hurt us much that way. It's the door we got to worry about. Hold your fire till then—unless you get a clear target."

A shot came from outside, at the far side of the building. There was a crash of glass. But one of the men had crept up to the window and fired back. There was a muffled scream of a man in pain.

"Reckon you got that rattler!" Misery called back. "Good work, pard!"

"Yep. I got him. Right through the shootin' arm, too," was the proud response.

MISERY saw a moving blob of darkness edging over from the alleyway next to the store. There was an odd motion to its pace. Then Misery made out what it was.

It was a heavy wooden barrel, probably a barrel of flour or sugar taken from the general store. It was being pushed to a point of vantage in line with the bank door.

The diminutive deputy sensed the reason for that barrel. Some one in the shelter of it would pepper away at the bank door with charges from a shotgun. Misery hurled three quick shots at the barrel, but it was good protection.

A second later, there was a deep report and a charge of heavy shot hailed against the door. From similar shelter a few feet to the left, another shotgun roared. The bandits were determined to get that door down.

The leaden hail chewed away at the old-fashioned wooden door. Misery ran to the extreme left side of the bank, peered out through a shattered window. He could just see part of the smudgy form of a man behind one of the heavy barrels. The deputy raised his .45, fired.

The man behind the barrel yelled in terror. He had received a bullet in the side, and while not dead, was removed from action. At least one of the shotguns had been silenced.

But two more added their heavy bass from the roof of the general store and from the alley next to it. Fire was being concentrated on the door—which suddenly went down with a clatter.

Then the bandits crept up determinedly. They moved behind barrels and packing cases. One bandit was in a strategic position only a few yards from the open doorway. He was firing a short-barreled shotgun through the opening. There was a spatter of lead against the desks in the bank.

"Take shelter, boys!" Misery yelled. "Every man get behind somethin' solid!"

He knew that this one-sided battle could not last long. That man with the short-barreled shotgun was shooting with devastating effect. A man inside the bank screamed as a charge caught him in the body. This was more than killing, more even than murder; it was butchery.

Misery had taken his lariat into the bank. He crouched in the shadows at the side of the doorway while three of his men returned a hot fire in the direction of the man with the short-barreled shotgun. Then, exposing himself for just an instant, the little deputy shook out a loop in his rope and made a cast.

The loop went over the top of the barrel. Misery pulled sharply. The barrel was pulled over. Three .45s flamed inside the bank, and the murderer back of the barrel sagged to the ground.

At almost the same instant, Misery's ears caught the hammering of hoofbeats. His heart leaped. The hoofbeats came from over near the cliff, the shortcut from Silver Creek. Misery felt almost certain they meant the return of Pete Rice and his posse.

"Hang on, boys!" he yelled. "Pete

Rice'll be here soon! Hear them hosses?"

It was clear that the bandits heard them. And evidently the bandits did not want anything like an even fight. They started to run for their horses.

Misery picked up his bolas. It was fashioned from rawhide, which connected three metal balls. More than once he had used this novel weapon to capture an outlaw without the necessity of shooting.

He whirled the bolas over his head, then let it fly. The weighted thongs wrapped around the legs of one of the fleeing bandits, who pitched to the ground.

This was an opportunity, Misery believed, to take a prisoner. Pete Rice always preferred uninjured prisoners to dead ones; for the uninjured ones could be forced to talk, to tell who backed them in their depredations.

It was one of the little deputy's foolhardy moments. He forgot the danger, forgot everything except that here was a chance to take a prisoner.

He rushed out of the bank, reached the side of the man he had tripped with the bolas.

A gun from the dark alley rapped out a single sharp note. Misery stopped in his tracks. A bullet had struck him a glancing blow on the left temple. He pitched forward, lay inert.

He was partly conscious. He could hear shots, hear the nearing *clippety-clippety* of the galloping horses. But he seemed paralyzed. He was unable to move a muscle. He could not put up so much as a finger in defense when two bandits ran toward him.

"Sling this ranny on your hoss!" the taller one yelled to the other. "Good to have a prisoner in case they catch us. Get goin'."

Still helpless, though not yet unconscious, Misery was lifted in the arms of the squat, broad-shouldered bandit. The latter ran back to the shadows of the alley. Misery felt himself lifted to the back of a horse.

His palsied hand started to raise his gun as the bandit leaped to the saddle behind his prisoner and put the horse into motion. Then the barrel of the bandit's .45 came down over Misery's head.

The deputy's little body sagged. Darkness descended upon him like a black curtain.

His generalship and courage had saved the Red Mesa bank. But his foolhardiness had meant his capture, possibly his death.

CHAPTER XII.

JOHN BLAKE'S MAN.

PISTOL PETE RICE leaned closer to Sonny's neck as the beautiful sorrel led the posse back in the direction of Red Mesa. For some time he had heard the echoes of gunfire. He realized that his hunch had been correct—that the bandits had planned to rob the Red Mesa bank while the posse investigated the report of the robbery over at Silver Creek.

"Come on, Sonny!" Pete pleaded. "Come on, old boy!"

Sonny straightened out into even greater speed. He left behind Teeny's big blood-bay, Lasso Davis's fleet gray and the other horses. He swung into the end of Red Mesa's main street.

But the shooting had stopped. It was abnormally quiet, except for the thump of Sonny's hoofs and the dimmer hoofbeats of the line of horsemen strung out to the rear.

Pete Rice was peering through the gloom. Ahead, he could make out the bulk of the bank building. He spurred Sonny toward it, pulled to a skidding halt. Then he was out of the saddle and leaping over a couple of bandits' bodies and an overturned sugar barrel. He ran into the bank.

The men Misery Hicks had organized into a fighting group were bunched

around two of their prone comrades. One was dead; the other badly injured. Some one was lighting a lantern.

"Where's Misery Hicks?" Pete snapped.

The man with the lantern looked up. "He's gone, sheriff! There wasn't nothin' we could do. He ran out o' the bank, tried to take a prisoner. Them bandits kilt him or creased him—one or the other! We seen the rattler carry Misery toward the alley."

Another one broke in: "There wasn't anything we could do, sheriff. First we was goin' to shoot. But we was afraid we'd hit Deputy Hicks if we did. Anyhow, we saved the bank. Them fellers didn't get a red cent."

But Pete Rice was not interested in red cents now—or dollars, either. There was a gulp in his throat. He was as fond of Misery Hicks as he could have been of a brother. He whirled, raced out of the bank.

He was making for Sonny when Teeny rode up at the head of the posse.

"You stay here at the bank, Teeny!" Pete yelled. "Misery's missin'. Get

Still helpless, though not yet unconscious . . . Misery felt himself lifted to the back of a horse.

your men together in case them rannies come back an' try to make another attack. I'm trailin'."

Teeny Butler gasped at the news of Misery's disappearance. But he was used to obeying orders, and leaped from his horse and ran into the bank as Pete topped Sonny and clattered up the main street. He could see the trail of the fleeing bandits. He forgot all about the possibility of odds against him.

THE trail of the bandits led down the Red Mesa Road to the junction near the water hole; then followed the path that Pete and his deputies had taken earlier that evening.

The bandits had a good start. The dim clatter of their horses' hoofs sounded from the top of the rim.

Pete spurred Sonny. He gained the top of the rim, swiveled his glance to the east, which was almost unbroken country, and then to the north where the thickets were scattered. He reined down Sonny. He might be running into an ambush. He was ready to sell his life dearly in that case.

But he ran into no hidden men. He found hoofprints which showed that the bandits had galloped through the cottonwood grove ahead. The tracks continued for a few hundred yards, across the barren plateau, through another

treed region, down a rocky trail and up another one.

Pete raced Sonny around the turn, toward the farther group of cottonwoods. But close to the cottonwoods, the tracks petered out again. Once more the bandits had mysteriously disappeared.

One thing was certain: The bandits had some hide-out in this section. There was some trick to it. Only a blank wall of rock met Pete's keen glance from side to side.

But Pete had an idea. It would be slow work trying to read sign during this pitch-black night. He would return to Red Mesa and send a telegram to "Hopi Joe," back in Buzzard Gap.

Hopi Joe was a professional Indian tracker. If there was one man in Trinchera County who could read trail better than Pistol Pete Rice, it was Hopi Joe. Joe and the sheriff together would take the trail and either track these bandits to their lair or find out where that lair was located.

Pete swung Sonny around. He headed back toward Red Mesa. He reached the crest. From this point the route was practically all downhill.

Suddenly Pete reined in sharply. He listened. Somewhere up the mountainside, a horse was loping toward him. Could it be Teeny, not content to have his boss ride out alone to trail the bandits? Or could it be one of the bandits themselves—one who had got separated from his companions and was now making for the holing-up place? Pete determined to find out.

He neckreined Sonny to the side of the trail. There was only a narrow ledge, but on a night as dark as this, horse and rider might pass unnoticed. Pete might even be able to trail the lone bandit, if such he was, to the hide-out.

The hoofbeats grew closer. The pace was slower; it was a hard strain on a horse, that constant uphill grind. The man on the horse drew rein, to light a cigarette. The tiny flare outlined only part of his face beneath the wide sombrero, and the ears of his horse. Those ears stood straight up.

Pete held his breath. That horse sensed the nearness of one of its kind. Sonny was trained not to whicker in tense situations. But the strange rider's mount was not so highly trained. Its head turned toward Sonny. It neighed loudly.

The rider tensed in his saddle. He snuffed out the match.

"Who's that over there?" he demanded.

"Don't move!" came Pete's challenge. "Never mind who *I* am! Let's see who *you* are!"

Bang! The strange horseman's gun winked. A bullet zipped past Pete Rice's ear. Then the rider had whirled his mount and was clattering back down the mountain trail.

PETE got Sonny into motion.

"Stop!" he yelled. He did not want to fire at that figure moving hazily through the darkness ahead. He could not be sure the man was a bandit. But he fired two shots into the air.

They had no effect on the rider ahead. The latter was pounding along.

The sheriff spurred Sonny. He pulled around a treacherous turn, fired another shot into the air. The rider ahead kept on.

The chase continued. Pursued and pursuer speeded along the treacherous trail. Caution was cast to the winds.

Pete patted Sonny's head, gave the sure-footed sorrel a slack rein. Sonny was gaining. Horse and rider took more definite form in the darkness ahead.

The two riders pitched around dizzy curves, speeded across narrow stretches between two precipices, slithered down steep inclines. Sonny was rapidly gaining. He drew within seventy feet—sixty—fifty!

The sheriff drew his long riata from

the saddle-sheath. He loosened the coils, shook them straight. Then the big loop was above his head, whirling, forming a big circle. It snaked out with unerring precision.

More by feel than by sight, Pete knew he had made an accurate cast. For the rope tautened.

Sonny tried to brace himself, slithered along stiff-legged. The rope tautened more. The fugitive was dragged from his horse, thrown to the rocky trail.

But almost instantly his gun flamed. A bullet whistled by Pete. There was a second wink of fire. Pete Rice felt a searing pain as though a hornet had stung him on the temple. He clutched the saddle horn to keep from falling.

A pit of inky blackness yawned before him. He gritted his teeth to keep his consciousness. A trickle of blood ran into his right eye. He winked out the blood, or most of it. Half-blindly, he stared ahead.

He guessed that the strange rider had managed to extricate himself from the noose and was mounting his horse. He could tell that from the noise on the trail ahead.

Pete Rice, still seeing none too well, spurred Sonny ahead. The sorrel responded valiantly.

But the other man, in panic, was applying the rowels so that his horse squealed in pain. For almost a full half minute, the roweled horse actually increased the distance between Sonny and itself.

Then as the fugitive reined around a hairpin turn, Pete heard his horse click its hoofs against something and stumble. Again the horse squealed, more in terror this time than in pain. The rider was sawing at his reins in a vain attempt to regain the balance of his mount. But he had taken that turn too wildly.

Pete raced ahead—just in time to see horse and rider plunge over the edge of the steep trail. There was a hard slap as the horse struck a ledge several feet below; then a long drawn-out scream; then silence.

Pete dismounted. He peered over the edge of the trail. The horse had pitched almoset on its head, had evidently been killed instantly.

The rider lay on the ledge, partly covered by the horse. The weighty animal had fallen on him. The head and shoulders could be discerned smudgily, with one arm dangling grotesquely over the ledge. Doubtless the man's chest had been crushed.

Pete led Sonny to the edge of the trail, slung the loop of his lariat over the saddle horn. Then, hand over hand, he descended to the ledge.

He struck a match on the sole of his boot. The first thing its flare showed was the brand of the horse—a Circle Cross brand!

Pete held the tiny flame over the face of the dead man. The sheriff's face tensed. The match went out, and Pete struck another. For seconds he held it over the dead face.

He had seen that face before. The sheriff had seen this man early that day, had seen him carrying water on Blake's horse ranch.

He was Blind John Blake's hired man!

CHAPTER XIII.

MISSING!

PETE RICE chewed gum vigorously as he raced Sonny back toward Red Mesa. That meant he was thinking fast. What had an employee of Blind John Blake been doing in that section at that hour? The section undoubtedly held the secret hide-out of the bandits.

That rider had acted like a desperate character. He had shot, shot to kill, at the first challenge. He had made a desperate effort to escape.

Pete decided upon an early investigation of Blind John Blake—as the horse

trader called himself. For Pete had known from the first that Blake was not blind.

The trader's eyes had the peculiar expression associated with the eyes of the blind. But Blake was faking blindness. For what purpose? And if Blake was behind all this new terror in Trinchera County, what could be his motive?

Robbery of gold carried by the stages and held in the vaults of the two stockmen's banks could be motives, of course. But what had all that to do with the mysterious disappearance of the Rattigan stagecoach? If Blake were behind all this, he could have had his men rob the stagecoach. But what advantage would he have in making the stagecoach disappear from the face of the earth?

And could the missing stagecoach have been hidden in this holing-up place which was evidently in this rocky section, or was this just a hide-out for the bandits?

These and a multitude of other questions Pete Rice asked himself as the racing sorrel neared Red Mesa. And more prominent than any other query in his mind was: Where was Misery Hicks? Had the little barber-deputy been killed, or was he being held as a hostage in case of the bandits' capture?

Sonny swung into the main street of Red Mesa and halted before the bullet-riddled structure which housed the Stockmen's Bank. A group of men, headed by Lasso Davis, rushed out.

"Find anything, sheriff?" Davis asked.

"Nothin' worth talkin' about," Pete replied. "Where's the telegraph station in this town?"

"Funny thing you should ask that," Lasso Davis said. "I was just there myself—wanted to wire the Wilcey Center bank to look out for robbers. Them danged bandits must have cut the wires!"

A frown crossed Pete Rice's gaunt face. He singled out Teeny Butler, told him in a low tone what had happened. "You better stand by here, Teeny," he advised. "I want to get off that telegram to Hopi Joe. I'll lope into Rangerville."

AT Rangerville, as he passed Wade Farberson's hotel, he saw Farberson sitting on the veranda, or "gallery" of the building. The hotel man hailed him. Pete reined up.

"A rider comin' in from Red Mesa said there was hell to pay over that way," Farberson remarked.

"Somethin' like that," Pete admitted.

Farberson got up, limped out to the curb where Pete sat astride of Sonny.

"What's comin' over this community?" Farberson raged. "We used to have the best-behaved place in the county—except maybe Buzzard Gap. You got any clews, sheriff?"

Pete grinned ruefully. "Clews," he said, "are like any other suspicions. They got to cool off a little before they're fit to handle. You heard about the Peters stage bein' held up, I reckon?"

Farberson's strong face hardened. "I heard about it. Shorty Dunne told me. An' I'm in with you more than ever from now on, Sheriff Rice, to keep law an' order in this section."

"Better take it easylike—with that leg," Pete advised. "You ain't a young man, you know. You'll have to let that leg heal, Mr. Farberson, before you can ride in any posses."

Farberson frowned. "You make me feel like an old man. Well, maybe I'm gettin' on. But I didn't mean about ridin' in posses. I've made a decision, sheriff."

"What's that?"

"Well, I'm good an' tired of all this killin' an' terror takin' place out thisaway. I want you to be one o' the first, Sheriff Rice, to know what I aim to do."

His eyes blazed with a look of resolution. "When the Rattigan stage disappeared, I felt bad for Tom. Tom ain't a bad feller; there's lots worse.

But I couldn't get real het up until I found about the attack on the Peters stage."

He leaned against the horse to ease his injured leg. "Now, Horace Peters was my friend, sheriff. His enemies was my enemies. We was business associates, too, in a way. His stage line helped my hotel an' my hotel helped his stage line. Outside o' my wife, Horace was the best friend I had in the world."

His voice shook queerly. Then grim determination showed in his face. "Old Horace is gone. But his stage line'll go right on. I ain't a rich man. But I got enough to take over his stage line interests. If there's profits that amount to much, a good deal of 'em'll go to his relatives, that live in Tucson. The stage line'll still go under the name o' 'The Peters Line.' An' I'm tellin' you—I promise you—that no crooks or killers'll get away with much from the Peters stages from now on."

"What you aim to do?" Pete inquired.

"I said I wasn't rich, sheriff, an' I ain't. But I got *some* money. I'm goin' to see that the Peters Line has the best guards—a pair of 'em on the box every trip. I'm goin' to see that they have mounted escorts. Passengers'll be safe. Valuable freight'll be safe. The driver'll be safe. Because my guards an' riders'll have instructions right from the first to shoot to kill—an' to shoot at the first sign of anything wrong!"

Pete nodded. "That's the way to talk." He loosened Sonny's rein. "I'll be back later, Mr. Farberson. I'd like to jaw over that plan with you a little. I want to ride over to the telegraph office."

He put Sonny into a walk, then reined up again. "By the way, Mr. Farberson, did them passengers that Shorty Dunne brought in on the Peters stage put up at your hotel?"

"Passengers?" Farberson echoed. "I didn't know there was any passengers, unless you call them dead men passengers. I wasn't here when the stage came in, but I heard that Shorty drove it in, after the attack on it. You might try the Trinchera House."

His tone was belittling. "They won't amount to much if they put up at the Trinchera House," he added. "Lot o' thugs an' gunnies an' hell-raisers usually stay there. It ain't a hotel, nohow, nothin' more than a saloon with sleepin' rooms over it."

"I'll try there, anyhow," Pete said, and once more put Sonny into a walk along the main street.

He pulled up at the little express station and telegraph office. He was about to take the pencil attached to the customer's table by a cord, and write a message to Hopi Joe at Buzzard Gap.

The telegraph operator lifted up a swing-section of the counter and came out. He carried a yellow slip in his hand.

"You're Sheriff Rice, ain't you?" he asked.

Pete nodded. "That's me."

"I just got a telegram for you, sheriff. Was about to send it over to the hotel." He handed Pete the message.

Pete's smoky-gray eyes swept over it:

COME TO BUZZARD GAP TO-NIGHT STOP YOUR MOTHER VERY SICK STOP JIM BATES

SHERIFF RICE ran out to the sidewalk, leaped upon Sonny's back. That was the only message that would make him leave Rangerville to-night.

Pete Rice had two loves—his mother and the law. He never neglected one for the other. But Teeny Butler could take care of things in the Rangerville section if anything broke loose to-night.

The sheriff whirled Sonny and galloped up the street.

There was a hail from in front of the Trinchera House. Deputy Shorty Dunne ran out into the road. Pete pulled up.

"I wanted to talk with you a second, private, sheriff," Shorty said.

"Make it fast!" Pete came back. "I'm ridin' hell-bent for Buzzard Gap. You might lope over to Red Mesa an' tell Teeny—or get some one you can trust to ride over. What did you want to tell me, Shorty?"

Shorty Dunne's face was sober. "Well, sheriff, I been accused o' havin' a big mouth on me—an' maybe I have. But somethin' happened that I didn't tell no one—until I'm tellin' you now. You know them two passengers I had on the stage?"

Pete nodded. "Yep. Where are they? Keep an eye on both of 'em while I'm gone, will you?"

Shorty fidgeted. "Well, I can't do that," he said. "That's what I stopped to tell you about. I was right busy drivin' that stage with one hand an' lookin' for bandits to boot. Hope you don't think I was careless."

He paused a second and lowered his tone. "But, fact is, when I drove up in front o' the hotel here in Rangerville, all I had aboard was dead men! That feller that called himself Hoyle—him an' that crazy old hombre—both of them wasn't in the stage!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE FAKE MESSAGE.

THE sheriff bit his lip in aggravation. He had banked much on talking with the man who called himself Hoyle. Somehow he had had a hunch that Hoyle might be able to clear up the mysterious happenings which were throwing this end of the county into almost continuous excitement.

Luck had been against Pete Rice all along. He would have cross-examined Hoyle back there by the water hole if speed had not been required in getting after that sniper.

Shorty Dunne must have been careless or forgetful in allowing his passenger to slip out of the coach along the route and taking the demented old man with him. Misery Hicks or Teeny Butler would never have allowed anything like that to happen. But deputies like Misery and Teeny were hard to duplicate.

And yet, Shorty Dunne, for all his lack of judgment, was game and loyal. Pete knew that the little Rangerville deputy would as soon have draped a rattlesnake around his neck as to be consciously derelict to duty. The sheriff did not have it in his heart to upbraid Shorty. In fact, it was praise of a sort that he gave him.

"Well, what happened can't be helped, Shorty," he said. "I admit you had a tough job comin' in, drivin' with one hand, an' with your mind so much on what might happen ahead that you never looked behind. An' I give you credit for sayin' nothin' about the matter to anybody but me. Get the news to Teeny Butler right away, though, over at Red Mesa."

Shorty was eager to make up for what he evidently felt remorseful about. "I'll start ridin' over to the Mesa this minute, personal," he said.

"Tell Teeny about it in private. Let him keep an eye out for Hoyle. Where we find Hoyle, we'll find that loco old hombre, I reckon. How did Hoyle act toward that loco old boy when we rode up an' got Blink Watson's body, Shorty?"

"Do you know," Shorty replied, "he acted kind o' peculiar. He looked out, an' first I thought he reco'nized the old coot. Then the old boy began to babble somethin'—an' Hoyle kept back in the coach an' didn't speak to the old feller at all."

Pete chewed his gum. "What I think," he said, "is that this Walter C. Hoyle is the same 'Walt Hoyle' that the old man was babblin' about. Hoyle probably recognized the old boy and

didn't want him runnin' loose babblin' about that gold. There's some mystery here.

"Well, get goin', Shorty. I expect to be back from the Gap in the mornin'."

Pete spurred Sonny along the main street. His face was hard. There was something big behind all this mystery. In the sheriff's opinion it was all part of a so far inexplicable plot whereby some conscienceless murderer planned to make a fortune.

Pete's eyes gleamed. Well, he had been up against cases somewhat similar before this. And most of those conscienceless men, slaves to their ruthless ambitions, were in their graves with gallows-broken necks. A few were in the State Penitentiary at Florence.

It was the face of Pistol Pete Rice, terror of evildoers, that the sheriff wore as he galloped up the main street.

But as he swung off into the Buzzard Gap Road, and thought of the reason that was bringing him to his home, his face softened. His brow showed worry, his eyes sorrow. His mother must be pretty ill if Jim Bates, the Buzzard Gap jailer, had wired when Pete was out on a case.

And the face that the sheriff wore as he galloped nearer and nearer his home town was not that of Sheriff Rice on the trail, but the face of plain Pete Rice, only son of the little gray-haired woman who was the proudest mother in Buzzard Gap.

IT was late when the sheriff reached Buzzard Gap. The lights were out in about all the Main Street establishments except the Arizona Hotel, the restaurant and the Puncher's Rest, a popular saloon.

Pete did not slacken Sonny's pace until he swung around a bend. The sheriff looked eagerly in the direction of the little flower-flanked cottage on the edge of town. Wrinkles of annoyance and deep worry creased his forehead.

Despite the late hour, he had expected lights to be showing in his mother's house. If she were ill, some women of the neighborhood would be nursing here.

But that dark house sent a chill of terror down the spine of the lawman who never thought of fear while he was on the trail. His mother must be very ill indeed if the house was in complete darkness. It would mean that his mother must have been removed from the house.

He swung Sonny in toward the corral, then dismounted quickly and clumped up to the veranda. His hand was trembling a trifle as he inserted his key in the lock of the front door. Some one might have left a note for him, telling where his mother had been taken; if not, he could find out by riding back to the center of town.

He opened the front door and entered. And now a ray of light showed at the top of the stairs. A few seconds later, a gray-haired woman appeared at the head of the stairway with a lamp in her hand.

"Pete!" came a soft voice. "I didn't wait up. I was afraid my boy wasn't coming home to me to-night."

Pete ran up the flight of stairs, took the lamp from his mother and kissed her.

"But how are you feelin', mother?" he asked anxiously.

"I never felt better, son," was Mrs. Rice's reply. But I'd waited up if I'd known you were coming."

"Then you're better?" Pete asked.

He saw the look of surprise in his mother's gray eyes. "Better?" she asked.

And then, suddenly, Pete knew what had happened. That telegram had been faked. Jim Bates, the jailer, had never sent it at all. Some one else had sent it.

"I'll bet you're hungry, Pete," Mrs. Rice said. She looked at her tall son as if he might still be a small boy. "It won't take but a few minutes to make

some fresh coffee. I won't have any myself, but it never seems to hurt you late at night. And there's a cold ham and some beaten biscuits——"

"Mother," Pete cut in, "there's nothin' that 'ud be more fun than havin' a bite here an' talkin' with you. But, honest, ma, I don't think I'd better stay. I been tricked into comin' here. It must mean that some one had an object in gettin' me out o' the Rangerville section to-night."

The expression of happy surprise that had been on Mrs. Rice's face changed to one of disappointment. Then those gray eyes of hers which could look so soft and maternal showed a look of resolution.

"Well, I reckon you know best, my boy, in a case like this. I've never interfered with your job, son. If you think it's best, go ahead."

She put her arms about the broad shoulders of her son. "But, Pete, do be careful. If some one sent you a false message, that's the work of an enemy. Watch yourself every minute to-night."

Pete grinned. "Bet I will, ma. Now, you get to bed. Maybe I'll find there's just been some mistake about this telegram. If I do, I'll be back here—if it ain't too late. But I hope to see you soon, anyhow. I want you to get a good night's rest."

Then the sheriff of Trinchera County bade his mother good-by. He kissed her again, clamped his wide, gray hat down on his head and clattered down the stairway. He opened the front door, locked it after him to keep his mother from an extra trip down and up the stairway, and ran toward Sonny.

He vaulted into the saddle and turned the sorrel toward the center of town.

PETE did not waste time checking up about the message with Jim Bates, the jailer. But he galloped along the main street, past the Punchers' Rest, past Sam Hollis's feed store and Misery Hicks's barber shop, and soon was on the county road.

At least he would not allow his trip to Buzzard Gap to be wasted. He would get Hopi Joe, the Indian trailer, while he was here.

On the way to Joe's cabin, his mind was a-whirl with questions. Who could have sent the fake wire from Buzzard Gap to Rangerville? What could be the motive back of the message?

He knew, in a general way. Something was brewing in the Rangerville section. Possibly another killing. Possibly another shipment of vanishing gold. Possibly—— But there was no end to possibilities. The thing to do was to get Hopi Joe and get started back toward Rangerville at once.

The sheriff turned off into a side road and soon drew up before the shack of Hopi Joe. There was a light burning inside, and Pete rapped at the door.

The door was opened and an impassive Indian face appeared. Then the face wrinkled in a smile. Hopi Joe and Pete Rice were firm friends as well as professional trail companions.

"You come in, sheriff," Joe urged. He led the way into the humble place, motioned Pete to the only chair while he himself sat comfortably on the dirt floor.

"You get business for us?" Joe asked, his jet eyes a-gleam.

Pete nodded. He made a rapid explanation of the vanishing stagecoach and the mysterious hide-out of the bandits. He explained his theories—for Pete Rice had already formed theories, although he had not previously discussed them.

Joe got up from the floor. "We go now?" he asked calmly.

Again Pete nodded. "Yes, we'd better hit the trail, Joe. You get your pony and meet me at the jail. I'll wait for you there. But hustle up."

"Very much hustle up."

Joe grinned. He went to a rude closet

in the corner. "You no drink the strong waters. You no like to stop and eat stew now. But you my guest." He took something out of the cupboard. It was a package of chewing gum. "This for you, my friend," he said.

Hopi Joe was full Indian. He wore a fillet of red cord about his crow-black hair, although he wore white men's clothes and to some degree had white men's habits. He played pool in the back room of the Punchers' Rest. He chewed gum. He smoked wheatstraw cigarettes and occasionally drank whisky. But no old-time redskin was ever any better on the trail.

"Thanks, my friend," Pete said. He ripped open the package, crumpled an oblong of the gum, shoved it into his mouth. His angular jaws were working as he left the cabin and once more mounted Sonny and pounded back toward town.

He meant to see if the telegraph operator was still on duty at the little Buzzard Gap railroad station. If not, Jim Bates, the jailer, was a relative-in-law of the operator and could get the operator up.

Pete meant to wire Shorty Dunne at Rangerville and Teeny Butler at Red Mesa, if the wire at the latter town had been repaired. He knew as well as a man could know without actual proof, that something was brewing in the Rangerville section to-night. His wire would put the officials on guard.

AS he galloped along, the whole Rangerville case was reviewed in Pete's mind as life is said to be reviewed in the mind of a drowning man. He and Hopi Joe would trail those bandits to their secret hide-out. They might possibly locate the missing stagecoach. But they could not bring back the lives that had been lost.

And there were other elements of the case that Pete, his mind always working on the case, had not cleaned up.

Blind John Blake, for instance. Where did Blake come into this? And the demented old man whose name Pete thought to be Weaver—why had he babbled of gold and of a mysterious "Walt Hoyle" who was evidently his friend? And why had the man who admitted his name was Walter C. Hoyle, feigned not to know the old man when they met after the attempted holdup of the Peters stagecoach?

Hoyle was not an unusual name. But neither was it met up with so frequently like Jones, or Smith, or Brown. Could Walter C. Hoyle be the "Walt Hoyle" that the old man babbled about in connection with gold? If not, why had Hoyle practically kidnaped the demented old man and also disappeared himself?

The sheriff determined to comb the entire countryside for the missing Hoyle. He believed that locating the cool, collected stranger would clear up many dangling ends of mystery.

Sonny swung into the main street of Buzzard Gap. Pete headed him toward the jail. He threw the reins over the sorrel's head, ran into the jail office.

Jim Bates, the jailer, looked up with a toothless grin. "Why, Pete! What you doin' back in this neck o' the woods?" he asked. "Rangerville case all cleared up?"

"It ain't a bit cleared up," Pete answered. Old Jim's question was in itself a statement that he had sent Pete no telegram, and Pete lost no time asking unnecessary questions.

Old Jim knocked out his pipe against the cement floor and settled down for a talk.

"I was just tellin' Rex Bridger that you wasn't in town," he said. "Rex was here with some telegram for you."

"Is his office still open?" Pete asked.

"Reckon so," Jim said leisurely. "Rex wa'n't here more than ten minutes ago."

"I'll ride over there," Pete said.

He ran out of the jail office, leaped

on Sonny's back and pounded down to the railroad station.

Rex Bridger, the telegraph operator, was just about to close up. He nodded as he recognized Pete. "Reckon Jim told you about the telegram," he said. "Here it is."

He handed Pete a yellow envelope. The sheriff tore it open. His face grew tense as he read:

RETURN AT ONCE STOP SOMETHING ABOUT STAGE STOP PLEASE BE SURE TO COME STOP HAVE FEARS STOP

The message was signed by Tom Rattigan, owner of the Standard Stage Lines.

PETE mounted Sonny and rode back to the jail. Hopi Joe had not arrived as yet, but Joe could be depended upon to be reasonably prompt.

The sheriff said nothing to old Jim Bates about the contents of the telegram. He sat down, but his fingers drummed impatiently on the desk while he waited for Hopi Joe.

Old Jim had recharged his pipe. He touched a match to it, puffed vigorously and settled down for one of his beloved talks. Old Jim Bates was a leisurely man in a leisurely job.

"No word on that sniper that tried to get Farberson or me, is there, Jim?" Pete asked.

Jim Bates shook his head. "Nope. But it seems that feller Brainstedt was mixed up with a mean lot of hombres. He didn't have no relations, so it seems he left his property—stock, wagons an' all—to a feller out Rangerville way."

"What's his name?" Pete inquired.

"Drake, or Lake, or somethin' like that," Jim answered. "He's a hoss trader o' some kind."

Pete's eyes hardened. Brainstedt's heir must be Blind John Blake. It was clear that Brainstedt and Blake must have known each other well. That explained why one of Blake's ranch-hands had been riding a horse with a Circle Cross brand.

But did it also explain why it was a similarly branded horse that had been stampeded near the hotel on the night of Horace Peters's murder?

The sheriff of Buzzard Gap felt like a man blundering into some treacherous, depthless morass. Blake might be honest. He might have a true deed to Brainstedt's old property. Or the will might have been faked, and Blake might be one of the biggest villains in Trinchera County.

There was the sound of pattering hoofs outside the jail, and Pete went to the door. Hopi Joe was there, mounted on his fleet, shaggy little Indian pony.

The animal could not be expected to keep up with Sonny. But it was fresh, while Sonny had had a hard drill of it the night before, had put in a busy day, and had been ridden fast from Rangerville to Buzzard Gap.

"Ready, Joe?" Pete called.

"Ready. We go like wind, huh?"

"That's it, Joe. You set the pace. Ride as fast as your pony'll go. I'll have Sonny right on your pony's heels an'——"

The Indian held up his hand, inclined his head slightly. "Some one run—like rabbit," he said.

Pete immediately caught the sound. There was a thump of booted feet along the pine-plank sidewalk of the main street, then the scuff and slap of the soles along the jail alley.

A man emerged out of the gloom. It was a town roustabout, an idler too fond of liquor, but not a bad fellow at heart.

"Pete Rice's house is afire!" he yelled. "The Punchers' Rest closed up, an' I started home. Then I seen smoke. It was comin' from Pete Rice's house. I run back here. Reckon the old lady needs help."

Pistol Pete Rice was astride Sonny and racing madly through the jail alley toward the main street.

CHAPTER XV.

WITHOUT A TRACE!

THE sheriff lost no time in demanding why the drink-sodden roustabout had not rushed into the house to rescue the lone woman there. For once, his spurs sank cruelly into Sonny's flanks.

Pete Rice was riding for all that life held for him. He seemed to lift Sonny from the alley into the main street with one jerky motion of the bridle. Then Sonny's hoofs beat a terrible tattoo along the hard road.

Hopi Joe galloped in his wake on his shaggy Indian pony.

Some one ran out of the Arizona Hotel. Two punchers had already mounted their cayuses at the Punchers' Rest hitch-rack and were making for the bend in the road where there was a drift of pungent wood smoke. They got into motion fast. But Sonny passed them as if their horses were standing still.

The sheriff speeded around the curve. His heart seemed to cease beating within his body. Smoke was pouring from the downstairs windows of the little white flower-bordered Rice cottage, and from the front porch.

Pete leaped to the ground while the sorrel was still in fast motion. He had seen a face at an upstairs window—the face of his mother.

The sheriff held an arm before his face and, half-blinded by the acrid smoke, plunged up the steps of the veranda. He threw the full weight of his muscular body against the front door. The lock gave way. Pete staggered into the hall.

The smoke-clouds were thick. The sheriff had to feel his way to the stairs and up them.

"Mother!" he yelled. "Mother!"

There was no answer. Coughing and almost choking, his eyes watery and inflamed, Pete persisted up the stairway.

"Mother!" he yelled again.

There was still no answer, and Pete stumbled across the upper hallway and into the room where his mother slept. He stumbled across a form on the floor, midway between the window and the bed.

In an instant he had whisked it up in his arms and was out in the hallway and clattering down the smoking stairway. There was practically no flame. It seemed all smoke.

As Pete raced out across the veranda, he noticed a long cart drawing up before the house. The Buzzard Gap Volunteer Firemen's Association was getting busy.

"We'll save the house, Pete, old boy!" some one yelled.

But Pistol Pete Rice hardly heard the voice. It was his mother he was worried about. He placed her slight form tenderly down near one of the flower borders of the garden, away from the swirling smoke, and worked over her feverishly.

At the end of a few minutes, Mrs. Rice opened her eyes.

"What happened, son?" she asked calmly.

"There was a fire, mother. I found you upstairs in the front room."

"Oh, yes. I remember now, Pete. I woke up and smelled the smoke. I got up, reached the window, but before I could get the window open, I got a choky feeling. I fell, I reckon."

Each breath of the clean, sweet outer air seemed to make her stronger. "I don't know how it could have started, Pete," she continued. "I put out the lamp before I went to bed."

"I don't know either, ma," Pete said. "But I know," he added grimly, "that it wasn't any carelessness o' yours!"

One of the neighbors ran over to the sheriff. "Bring your mother over to our house, Pete. We'll take good care of her while you help with the fire."

"Thanks, pard," Pete said.

He lifted the little gray-haired woman and strode diagonally across to a neighboring house where he deposited his precious burden on a couch. A kindly-faced middle-aged woman took charge of her, and Pete ran out. He expected to find his mother's home in flames by this time.

But several men were carrying huge tins out of the house and hurling them from the veranda. At close range, Pete saw what they were. They were improvised smoke-pots—big tins or drums stuffed with rags, which sent up clouds of thick, oily smoke.

Other men were busy with rakes, pulling similar smoke-pots out from beneath the veranda.

One of the volunteer firemen came over to the sheriff. "It's all right, Pete. There ain't no fire at all. A little damage from smoke, but you'll have your house as good as new in a week. Now, I wonder who could 'a' planted them things in your house."

PETE wondered, too. But it was clear what had happened. The same man—or the same group of men—who had sent him the fake telegram had done this. They had broken one of the lower windows and dropped the burning smoke-pots on the kitchen floor. Others had put the rag-stuffed cans beneath the veranda.

They had sent him the fake telegram to get him out of Rangerville. They had started this fire, not necessarily to burn down the sheriff's house, but to keep him away from Rangerville, to delay his start from Buzzard Gap. What could be going on in the Rangerville section?

Pete clapped his hand to his shirt where he had placed the wire from Rattigan. "Return at once," Rattigan had pleaded. And now many valuable minutes had been lost.

"You can handle this fire?" Pete asked the volunteer fireman.

"Sure thing, sheriff. Almost got it cleaned up right now."

"O. K. Friend, do you mind runnin' over to Winton's an' seein' how my mother is? Better call Doc Buckley, too, just to make sure. I got pressin' business."

He picked out Hopi Joe on his Indian pony at the side of the road. "Ready, Joe!" he called.

Then he was on the back of Sonny, and once more sheriff and Indian trailer were tearing down the darkened street.

Pete Rice knew every cross-trail and shortcut in Trinchera County. A little over a mile from Buzzard Gap he led the way off to a partly grown-over cattle trail, now little more than a path, which would come out just below the Ten Mile Water Hole above the settlement of Placer.

The sheriff held down Sonny to the pace of the Indian pony, which was sturdy and fresh and did very well. The horses' tails streamed straight out behind as they pounded madly along the trail.

A LATE moon had risen, and the stars were out in full splendor. The country ahead lay like a slumbering person, intent only upon rest. Long before the junction near the Ten Mile Water Hole was reached, the tall stone spire that guarded the hole stood out like a stately monument.

And a mile farther on, so bright was the moon, that Pete could discern moving figures along the road in the vicinity of the ghost-town of Last Hope.

At first Pete believed the figures—they looked like riders at that distance—might be bandits preparing to hold up a stage. The sheriff knew of no stage scheduled to go through this section at this hour, but nevertheless he spurred Sonny. The animal tore ahead in a cloud of dust.

As he swerved into the stage road, however, Pete could see who one of the

riders was. Teeny Butler's mammoth blood-bay horse was unmistakable.

The big deputy put up his hand and waved at Pete.

The sheriff's sorrel swooped around the curve.

Hopi Joe's pony had dropped behind, but the Indian was urging it along as fast as it could go. The Indian's face was expressionless, except for the black eyes with their beady lights of expectancy.

Pete could see the riders advancing to meet him. He recognized the rider closest to Teeny. It was Tom Rattigan, owner of the Standard Stage Lines.

"What delayed you?" Rattigan called out. His tone was rather impatient.

Pete gave no explanation of the reason for his delay. "What happened?" he snapped.

Rattigan pulled up his horse. He removed his wide hat, wiped the sweat from his brow. His face looked gray in the moonlight. The man seemed to have aged years since Pete had last seen him.

"Happened?" Rattigan spat out. "The same thing! That's what's happened! Another stage o' mine has disappeared from the face o' the earth! If this goes on—if it happens even once more—I'm a ruined man!"

CHAPTER XVI.

TOM RATTIGAN'S STORY.

THE sheriff of Buzzard Gap peered shrewdly at Tom Rattigan. The stage line owner looked honest enough—which was not always a sure sign of anything.

Rattigan had also apparently proved an alibi in the murder of Horace Peters, rival stage line owner, but not conclusively. And he was known to be friendly with Blind John Blake, the latter coming more and more under suspicion in the eyes of Pete Rice.

Could it be possible that Rattigan *himself* was back of the disappearance of his own stages? He had promised to indemnify the shippers for the lost gold, but so far had not done so, pleading comparative poverty.

Rattigan looked sharply back at Pete Rice. He seemed to sense that he was under new suspicion.

"I know!" Rattigan said grimly. "I reckon this'll make me look more suspicious than ever! But I don't care. I thought it was good judgment at the time. I done it for the best interests of everybody."

Pete's brow was clouded. "What you talkin' about, Rattigan? What did you do?"

Rattigan wiped his sweaty brow again. He told his story disconnectedly. He was under a high nervous strain. But Pete, studying that square, pugnacious face all the time, finally made sense of it.

Rattigan had tried to fool any possible bandits on this stagecoach trip, was his claim. In doing so, he had been forced to keep facts from others, even from Pete Rice.

"Them bandits knowed the schedule o' the regular day stage all along the route," Rattigan went on. "So I figured to put one over on 'em. There's no night stage on my line. So I put one on special—to-night."

Pete remained silent. The sheriff's jaws worked on his cud of chewing gum.

"I done everything I could to fool them rannies," Rattigan continued. "I had the Rangerville-to-Wilcey Center stage, which never carries no gold in *that* direction, come into Wilcey Center on time. Then I had the express guard get off as usual, an' the driver swing around an' make for the stables."

"But they didn't go to the stables," Pete guessed.

"Not to stay there. I actually had the coach draw into the stables. I seen

to it that no suspicious characters was hangin' around. Then the driver put up his hosses an' went home, apparently.

"But later that night, I had the driver an' his express guard come back to the stables. I'd had the shipment o' gold for the boot brung down meanwhile an' kept there under guards I could trust, or thought I could.

"Then," Rattigan went on excitedly, "later that night I had the stage start out, drivin' through the back slide door o' the stable an' gettin' down a back street o' Wilcey Center. I thought I'd euchre any possible bandits that way."

"Were you in Wilcey Center when the special stage started out?"

"No. I kept away from there on purpose. I stayed right in Rangerville, same as ever. The stage could slip right along the route, off schedule. No bandits could be tipped off in time to get at it."

"An' yet it disappeared."

"It done just that! An' that ain't all. As far as we can check up, by askin' them fellers in the ghost-town an' the folks in Placer, it disappeared about where the last one did! Two old coots in a cabin back here in Last Hope seen it pass. Nobody in Placer, up a couple o' miles, seen it pass."

Pete's shrewd eyes raked the assemblage of riders with Rattigan. All were dependable. Besides Teeny, there were Shorty Dunne and two merchants from Rangerville.

"What's your own theory, Rattigan?" Pete asked.

"About how the stage disappeared? None at all. O' course, I know by this time that there's a leak up there in Wilcey Center, where both shipments o' gold started out from."

"Did you wire any towns along the way, to see if the stage passed through?"

"No. I didn't want to do that. I wanted to keep the entire thing dark from first to last. A secret trip. A special schedule. No passengers. Two good men on the box. I figured I had everything my own way. I made all them plans on account o' the greater than usual shipment o' gold."

"Then what made you telegraph me at Buzzard Gap? The stage hadn't turned up missin' at that time, had it?"

"No, it hadn't. But I got thinkin', and I got worried. I began to reckon maybe I'd gone too far, that I wasn't as smart as I thought I was. I wired you to get here so's we could lope out an' meet the stage, escort it in. I figured you'd be here in plenty o' time to meet the stage before it passed through the bad danger points."

"An' when I didn't come——"

"When you didn't come, I went an' told my story to Deputy Butler here. He'd rode over to Rangerville. Then me an' Shorty Dunne an' Deputy Butler an' these two friends o' mine couldn't wait any longer. We rode out to meet the stage. We made the inquiries I told you about. We found it had disappeared between Last Hope an' Placer."

There was an abrupt silence. The men stared at one another. Pete Rice chewed his gum.

What he had feared had come true—that spies in Buzzard Gap connected with the Rangerville killers had sent him the fake wire to get him out of the section. They had set his mother's home afire to keep him out of the section—until it would be too late to do any good.

"Well, Rattigan," Pete said finally, "I ain't a bettin' man, but I'd be willin' to bet a hoss that a week from to-night we got the folks back o' these outrages behind the bars.

"The big hombre that's planned all this is clever. No doubt about that. But a clever hombre always thinks he's cleverer than he is—an' goes too far. I reckon that's about what's happened right now."

ALTHOUGH Pete Rice had run into several bits of bad luck since coming to the Rangerville section, he realized that it was his turn for a piece of good luck now. For at least the trail that Hopi Joe would try to cut sign on would be comparatively fresh.

"You'd better ride into town, Rattigan, you an' your friends," Pete suggested. "Me an' Teeny Butler an' my friend Hopi Joe here'll—well, we'll see what we can find."

Rattigan had no objection. He looked tired and drawn. He and Dunne and his two storekeeper companions loped off in the direction of Rangerville.

Pete turned to Teeny. "No trace o' Misery?"

The big deputy shook his head mournfully. "I been plenty busy on that, boss. But it looks like Misery's gone for good. If I could once get the hide-out o' them hombres that got him——"

His black eyes flashed. His big fists clenched. There was a gulp in his throat, and he could say no more on the subject.

Pete Rice led the way down to where the wide tracks of the stagecoach seemed to have vanished into thin air. For the first time he voiced a theory that he had held for some time.

"Now, boys," he said to Teeny an' Hopi Joe, "here's at least a part o' the mystery. I wanted to keep quiet in front o' them other rannies."

He pointed to where the stagecoach tracks ended abruptly. "You see there? These two wheeltracks get sort o' mixed, don't they. Now, they's regular buckboard tracks all up an' down this road. Here's what *I* think about it:

"I think that them bandits followed the stagecoach with a regular buckboard. Lots o' buckboards pass on this road. No one'd be apt to remark about a buckboard passin'. It wouldn't get attention, like a stagecoach would."

He pointed out where the buckboard tracks seemed to blend into similar tracks. "Them bandits had extra buckboard wheels on the buckboard. They just jacked up the stage, quicklike, while their armed escort seen to it that the road was kept clear of any spies. Then they took the extra set of wheels from the buckboard an' put 'em on the stage. Both vehicles then drive ahead. Their wheels mix with the other buckboard tracks along the road."

"An' the buckboard drives straight into town, say, while the stagecoach with the buckboard wheels is took off the road somewhere," Teeny remarked.

"That's about it. An extra buckboard wouldn't cause any attention."

Pete studied the ground again. "Moreover, when they sling the new-wheeled stage off the road, I'm bettin' that they use burlap on the horses' hoofs an' maybe on the wheels for a part o' the way to the hide-out. There wasn't any traces before. They might even had men followin' with brooms to smooth out the trail. But this evenin' they didn't have time to be so elaborate. Looka that!"

He pointed to an almost imperceptible rut-mark. It was blurred, as though something might have been pressed between the tire and the ground.

"There's prob'ly more to it than that," he admitted, "but now"—turning to the Indian guide—"it's your turn, Joe. Keep your guns free in their leather, boys. We might start trailin' some one, an' end up by havin' 'em trail *us!*"

Hopi Joe was lying prone on the road. His beady eyes were within an inch of the roadbed, studying it. He grunted as he got to his feet. Hopi Joe, pool-player and gum-chewer, had suddenly become all Indian again.

He pointed to one side of the trail. "Go that way. Me get on pony, go first. You friends follow, no spoil trail"

The men mounted. With his eyes glued to the ground whitened by the bright moonlight, Hopi Joe rode calmly

along. Those eyes were almost expressionless. But they could see things in woods and fields and streams and trails that no white man's eyes could discern. Hopi Joe was in his element.

AT the end of a couple of miles, the rocky terrain petered out for a stretch. The wheelmarks were much more distinct, although here in the softer soil it was obvious that the tires had been wrapped with burlap. It looked like easy trailing.

And suddenly Hopi Joe grunted in disgust. He halted, pointed ahead

"Ugh! Go in there!" he said.

The sheriff and his deputy saw a shallow stream which wound through rocky terrain. Pete Rice knew it as Rock Creek, which wound north from the Ten Mile Water Hole and fed into a larger stream, practically a river, in the general vicinity of Rangerville.

"Harder now," Hopi Joe announced. "Maybe have to wait for daylight. Water stamp out marks of wheels. But maybeso not altogether."

Hopi Joe dismounted from his pony. He led it north, wading through the shallow stream. The moonlight made the surrounding country almost as bright as day. Joe's gimlet eyes were focused on the stones in the stream bed.

Pete and Teeny rode their horses slowly in the Indian's wake.

They had advanced about an eighth of a mile, looking for marks on the rocky banks which might have been made by the stagecoach turning out of the stream, when luck once more played against them. The moon was waning and the stars were disappearing. A mild storm threatened.

"No good light; no see good," Hopi Joe remarked.

Pete accepted the inevitable. "Well, we can't do anything about it, Joe," he said. "Reckon we'd better knock off and come back in daylight."

The sheriff took a photographic glimpse of the surrounding countryside. At least, two points connected up. This was the same section where the bandit horsemen had disappeared so mysteriously. For easily a mile along both banks, farther back, were towering walls of granite.

Doubtless when Hopi Joe finally traced the tracks of the missing stagecoaches, he would also have the location of the bandit hide-out.

Hopi Joe mounted his pony again. Before turning his mount, he pointed in the direction of the rock barriers on both sides. "Hard to trail up there," he said. "But maybeso, in good morning light. Maybeso——"

Bang! A bullet whistled through the narrow space between Sonny and the Indian's pony. It came from the towering cliffs to the right.

Bang! Another report sounded. The slug spatted against the rock near Sonny's forefeet.

Pete and Teeny were off their horses and had stampeded them down the stream out of danger. They took the only protection offered by this barren country; they crouched in the stream itself, first putting their ammunition belts around their necks to keep the shells out of the water. Their guns flamed.

"You get goin', Joe!" Pete called to the guide. "This ain't your job. Your job is trailin', not tradin' lead!"

But Hopi Joe, although not a great fighter, was a fair shot and was full of courage. He stampeded his pony back down the stream and added the music of his derringer to the .45s of the lawmen.

Bullets came close to the Indian and his friends. One ticked the right shoulder of the guide, but his stoical face gave no evidence of it.

Pete and Teeny were blasting lead in the direction of the rocks. Bullets struck about them with vicious, spatting sounds.

Pete waited for the next flash of gunfire from the rocks. The flash came. The sheriff fired at the same instant.

Ping!

And suddenly Pete Rice, famed for fighting against long odds and enjoying it, turned to his men.

"We're leavin', boys," he said calmly.

"Leavin'?" Teeny echoed indignantly. "Why, what's gettin' into you, boss?" For once, Teeny Butler was on the verge of insubordination.

"Come on, boys!" Pete repeated sternly. "We're leavin', I say. Slip back down the stream toward your hosses. We've learned somethin', anyhow!"

CHAPTER XVII.

THE GOOD SAMARITAN.

PETE RICE led his men downstream. They got their horses and continued back toward Rangerville. The sheriff did not tell what he had learned. He knew the value of using discretion at all times.

If Teeny had any ideas, he never voiced them. And Hopi Joe rode along without uttering a word.

Occasionally, however, the guide got off his horse and reached down into the stream for something. Finally Pete Rice got curious.

"What you findin' there, Joe?" the sheriff inquired.

Hopi Joe held up four dead fish. "Find in stream," he said. "Maybeso miners up above use dynamite. Make fish die. But good to eat, Fresh."

Pete took the fish and examined them. His eyes lighted up. An idea flashed in his brain.

"Joe," he said, "if you let me throw these away I'll buy you the best fish dinner you can get in Rangerville."

Hopi Joe frowned. Then finally his face cleared. "You say so, all right," he finally conceded.

Pete examined the fish again and then threw them away. He felt better as he continued the ride into Rangerville. The case was breaking little by little. He was finding small clews. Some time he would fit them all together like little bits of a cardboard puzzle.

Yet his heart was heavy. He was thinking of his missing deputy, Misery Hicks. He fully believed that Misery had been foully murdered.

And then, as he and his companions rode up to the Rangerville House long after dawn, his heart leaped. For Misery Hicks was calmly sitting on the veranda of the hotel.

The little deputy's head was bandaged. But his feet were resting comfortably on another chair, and there was a glowing wheatstraw cigarette in his mouth.

"By jaspers!" Misery called out. "I been waitin' here for you hombres more than an hour."

THERE was a touching reunion. The three lawmen of Buzzard Gap were together again. Pete and Teeny hurled questions.

"Wait a minute, boys; wait a minute!" Misery pleaded. "One thing at a time, as the feller says. Yep, it's good to be back with you again. But I don't deserve no credit. Nope. Not a bit!"

He told Pete and Teeny the details of the happenings back in Red Mesa. "I reckon I used bad judgment tryin' to take that ranny prisoner," he admitted. "Anyhow, they got me. I sure thought I was a goner then."

He continued his story: The chief of the bandit raiding party had sent Misery's captor on ahead with the little deputy sagged over the saddle. The bandit chief wanted to put a screen behind their hostage and possible pursuit.

"Then came the right funny part," Misery went on. "We was ridin' along. I'd come to. Then there was a shot from a bunch o' buckbrush to the right o' the trail. The feller that held me

prisoner dropped to the ground. He was hit in the shoulder, I reckon."

"So you took his hoss an' hightailed it," Teeny guessed.

"I didn't do no such thing, you big lummox!" Misery retorted. "How could I? When I come to, I found I was hog-tied proper. But here comes the big surprise."

He took another breath and continued: "The feller what fired the shot from the buckbrush—whoever he was—comes runnin' out o' hidin'. He has a knife in his hand. He cuts the ropes around me. An' then what you reckon he says?"

"Ah ain't no mind reader," Teeny Butler put in.

"He calls me *by name!* He says 'Git goin', Hicks. You can't go back; them bandits is between you an' Red Mesa. Stick your spurs into that hoss an' go ahead! You'll find some cottonwoods up a piece at the right o' the road. Lay low in there until them bandits pass. Then get back to Pete Rice an' help out on this case.' That's what he said," Misery ended up.

"What did the ranny that helped you look like?" Pete asked.

"Can't tell you that, boss. He had a handkerchief around his face. He looked like a bandit. But whoever, or whatever, he was, he sure proved a pard o' mine."

Misery went on to tell that he had hidden in the cottonwoods for hours; then, warily, had ridden back in the direction of Rangerville and arrived there about an hour after dawn.

His sharp blue eyes brightened, and Pete Rice knew that his little barber-deputy had another surprise. "An' I made a discovery, boss," he told the sheriff. "Back o' them cottonwoods I found a fresh, shallow grave! An' who do you reckon was in it?"

Without waiting for a reply, he continued: "There was the driver o' that missin' stagecoach, Gawky Henderson, an' the old passenger that Farberson mentioned."

"You found only *two* bodies?" Pete asked sharply.

"That's it. I knowed Gawky Henderson by sight. I didn't know the other poor fellow, but he was old, an' answered the description Farberson gave of his friend that was comin' on the stagecoach."

"How had them hombres been killed?" Pete asked. "They wasn't shot; I know that much, because if they'd been drilled, the shots 'ud been heard back in Last Hope, which they wasn't."

"No, they wasn't shot," Misery agreed. "Gawky'd been cracked over the head with some kind of a club—fractured skull, I reckon. The old feller'd been knifed."

Pete chewed his gum. He was thoughtful for a moment. "No sign o' Tuffy McShane's body?" he asked Misery.

"Not a sign, boss."

"That's right interestin'," Pete declared. "Tuffy was one o' the fightin'-est hombres in Trinchera County. They never killed *him* by a crack over the head or with a knife. No, sir! An' they didn't shoot him, because no shots was heard in the Last Hope settlement."

"They might 'a' took him prisoner," Teeny ventured.

"Not Tuffy McShane!" Pete said with conviction. "They'd know the danger o' tryin' to take a fighter like him prisoner. Nope! They killed McShane some other way—an' it's to have a big bearin' on this case!"

"What way would they 'a' kilt him?" Misery asked.

Pete yawned. He was half-dead for sleep.

"That'll come out later," he said cryptically. "Let's get some shuteye, boys. My system can sure sop up a heap of it right now."

PISTOL PETE RICE slept exactly three hours and a half. He could have done with twice as much rest, but he had a heavy day before him.

He left Hopi Joe and his deputies sleeping. He could be back well before noon, and rouse them to take the trail. Just at present, Pete had to make a trip which circumstances had forced him to put off. It was to the horse ranch of the man who called himself Blind John Blake.

Somehow the sheriff believed he was nearing the end of the trail on this Rangerville mystery. There were several questions he wanted to ask Blake—why the trader was masquerading as a blind man, when Pete knew that he could see; why one of his hired men should have acted like a desperate bandit; why Brainstedt, the Buzzard Gap rustler and brand-blotter, should have willed him his ranch—lock, stock and barrel.

The sheriff's mind was a maze of thoughts as Sonny drummed along the main street in a cloud of dust and turned into the road that led to Blake's ranch. The sun was well up and warm, the sky practically cloudless.

The shortcut trail left the stage road and wound through a rougher country of cottonwoods and scattered boulders. It was undulating country. Danger might lurk over the next rise, and Pete Rice's eyes were ever wary, even while his brain was occupied with thoughts of the Rangerville mystery.

Accordingly, he was not taken by surprise when a shadow flicked back of one of the giant boulders to the right. Pete kneed the sorrel to the left, just made the half-shelter of loosely-strewn trees when a gun barked.

The lead spattered against the bole of a cottonwood tree. A puff of smoke drifted out from behind the giant boulder to the right.

Pete's gun flashed in his hand. He knew this would be an uneven battle. Whoever that sniper was behind the boulder, the sniper had the advantage. The big, squat rock sheltered him completely. Even if Pete charged, the sniper could circle the rock and have a fair target from any side.

The gun behind the boulder snarled again. The sniper was getting better range. The bullet snicked a strip of bark from a tree, ricocheted in an arc over Pete's head.

The sheriff was out of the saddle in an instant. He had slapped Sonny on the rump and hazed him back into the thick of the cottonwoods. Sonny was a big target. And Pete was almost as solicitous about the sorrel's life as about his own.

A third shot came.

Pete threw himself prone on the ground. Two quick shots belched from his gun. The slugs chipped the boulder, but the man back of it was safe. Pete prepared to charge. He was taking a big chance—but he had taken big chances before.

He raised into a crouch, was about to run toward the boulder. Then, from a second boulder, several feet behind the first, another figure materialized.

Pete's face grew grim and hard. He believed he had run into an ambush. There might be other men behind those other boulders. But no fear showed in the sheriff's eyes. If this was the end, it was the end. He would go out fighting.

But suddenly the figure behind the second boulder fired—and Pete was surprised to discover that it was a shot in the air. What was the idea? Was it a signal of some kind for other bandits to come out of hiding, to wipe Pete Rice from the face of the earth?

Pete went back into his prone position again. He would await developments.

And the developments were rather amazing. The sniper whirled. Pete

could just catch his shadow at the side of the boulder. The man behind the second boulder fired again, but not into the air this time. He fired directly at the sniper behind the boulder!

The sniper's gun snarled back at the strange man behind the rear boulder. Then the man who had shot in the air swung up his gun arm again. His Colt's flashed flame. The bullet tore into the shoulder of the sniper, stretched the sniper out so that he would have been an easy target for Pete.

But Pete Rice was not shooting wounded men unable to defend themselves, even when they were bandits.

And another surprising development took place: The man who had sprawled out the sniper, raced back to a mount ground-anchored back of a high boulder, vaulted into the saddle and galloped away!

PETE whistled for Sonny. The sorrel came galloping up. Then the sheriff was in the saddle and chasing his strange deliverer. Pete's eyes were bright. Didn't that fellow running away look familiar? Wasn't there something about the set of his shoulders that was reminiscent?

He put Sonny into full stride. Pursuer and pursued tore up a rocky ascent, their horses kicking up the shallow soil that clothed the slope.

The pursued man tore over the crest. He was a hundred yards away before Sonny came over the rise in a position where Pete could get another flash at him.

Within the next dozen strides, Sonny closed the gap to about ninety yards. Superior horseflesh and superior horsemanship were telling.

The advance rider would not give up, however. He turned in his saddle. The big, floppy Stetson shielded his face, but the morning sun glinted on the barrel of an upraised .45.

Pete kept coming. There was something in the upward swing of that arm that lacked viciousness. That raised gun suggested more of a bluff than anything else. The sheriff decided not to shoot. After all, the fugitive had practically saved his life.

And the man did not shoot. He turned in his saddle again and sank his spurs into his horse's flanks. The tiring animal went into a swifter stride.

But Sonny closed up twenty more yards.

The chase went on. The fugitive made for a cottonwood clump. It was bad judgment. He lost time weaving in and out among the trees.

Pete Rice, seasoned campaigner, circled Sonny about the small grove. He was less than a hundred feet behind the fugitive when the latter emerged from the grove, spurring his tiring horse.

A rather steep slope of land came next. The gap had been cut down to about eighty feet as Sonny, fresh and untiring, reached the crest of it. The fatigued horse ahead was trying desperately. But Pete sensed that the race was about over.

He reached for his riata, shook it out. Sonny was gaining at every leap now. Pete put the loop swishing in great circles over his head. Then it snaked out.

The gap had meanwhile been cut down to less than sixty feet. The lariat was sixty-five feet in length. The loop settled over the shoulders of the fleeing horseman. Sonny skidded to a halt. His haunches went down like a cow pony's. The rope tautened.

The fugitive was whipped from his saddle. He flopped to the ground and lay still. His horse, free of its burden, cut down into a lazy lope, then circled about, finally halted altogether and looked back, breathing hard.

Pete swung himself from his sorrel. He was across the intervening space in a few strides. The man was lying face down.

He reached for his riata, shook it out . . .

Pete turned him over, lifted the Stetson that had been pulled down snugly over the forehead.

Then the sheriff whistled. No wonder that figure had looked somewhat familiar.

The man on the ground was the stagecoach passenger who had so mysteriously disappeared!

It was Walter C. Hoyle.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE FINAL STAGE HOLDUP.

AFTER a couple of moments of hard breathing, Hoyle sat up. He stared at Pete Rice quizzically. The shock had knocked the breath from his body. But finally his lean, brown face split into the characteristic smile that Pete remembered so well.

"Well! So it's the sheriff again! "Howdy, sheriff!"

Despite his rough experience, there was the same poise about Hoyle, the same cool, collected, almost mocking manner.

"Yep, it's the sheriff again," Pete said dryly. He reached down and plucked Hoyle's .45 from its holster. "An' the sheriff's goin' to have an important little talk with you, Hoyle."

Hoyle's eyebrows arched above his keen gray eyes. "A talk is always pleasant," was his come-back. "But you look rather grim, sheriff. Why? You haven't anything to hold me for." He

looked up and smiled again. "Have you?" he asked.

"That depends," Pete replied. "Your disappearance from the stage on the way to Rangerville was right mysterious. You took another man along with you. How do I know that you didn't kill him and hide his body some place?"

"You don't," was Hoyle's cool retort. "Not yet, at least. But you *will* know—that I didn't. I can produce that man alive, whenever I'm required to do so."

Pete chewed his gum. This man was more than a match for him in conversation, he admitted to himself. This man was keen, educated. It showed in his speech.

Again Pete looked at those slender, uncalloused hands. This man Hoyle did not work for a living; at least did not work at manual labor.

Nothing could be gained by verbal fencing with this stranger. He did not look like a crook to Pete Rice. He looked keen—sharp in a business deal, perhaps, but not criminally so. He could not be vicious; he had practically saved Pete's life and, later, had held his fire, raising his .45 only as a bluff. Direct talk, straight talk, might go with this man.

"Hoyle," Pete snapped, "there's somethin' irregular about you. You had a big object in takin' that loco old man from the stage, an' you know it. You can tell me things that I want to know. An' remember, you're talkin' to the sheriff o' Trinchera County. Now, come on, Hoyle! Come clean!"

He stared down at the man on the ground. "You know who that old man is. An' he knows you—leastwise, he does when he's in his right mind. He was gabblin' about a Walt Hoyle. Your name is Walter C. Hoyle. You're the Walt Hoyle he talked about."

Pete took a shot in the dark. "Better tell me all about that gold, Hoyle!"

Hoyle stared up silently for a few seconds, then turned his head away. His sharp eyes swept over the rolling terrain rising into the steep, distant hills. He swiveled his gaze back to the sheriff. He appeared to be trying to make a decision. Then he spoke.

"All right, sheriff. I'll tell you a few things. Guess I'd better uncoil this rope, though, and sit comfortably, don't you think so?"

Pete nodded. He helped the man extricate himself from the rope.

Hoyle sat down again, reached in his pocket, drew out a crumpled package, took from it a ready-made cigarette. He struck a match on his boot, got the white pellet burning, exhaled a ribbon of smoke.

Pete squatted on the ground beside him. He hitched his .45s a little more toward the front.

"You won't need 'em," Hoyle said with another flashing smile.

"Go ahead with your story," Pete told him.

HOYLE began. Pete listened intently. He never forgot that scene—the bright, sunshiny day, the long, rolling hills, no noise but the sound of Hoyle's rather pleasant, cultured voice.

"I'm a gold prospector by profession, sheriff. Not so much in the practical end of it as the business end, the money-getting end. My partner, Jim Weaver—yes, the old fellow you found—was in my employ. Weaver's one of the best, most experienced hard-rock men in the West."

Hoyle took a puff from his cigarette, went on leisurely:

"About two months ago, I had Jim examine some land west of the town of Soda Springs. All the tests we showed made a surprisingly rich assay. I arranged to tie up the land. I'm rather an expert at that sort of thing."

An idea occurred to Pistol Pete Rice. "You said west o' Soda Springs?" he asked.

"That's it. I knew I'd make my strike, enough to make me rich to the end of my days. Of course I couldn't swing it—financially, I mean—to the extent that I wanted. So I decided to go East and get the thing financed by a syndicate. Another matter I'm pretty good at," Hoyle added.

He paused, then went on: "Now, Jim—well, Jim has found plenty of gold in his time, but he never had a penny. Whisky. Practically a disease with him. I tried to get Jim to go East with me, almost kidnaped him to make him go. Wish I had. But old Jim is stubborn. He was born and raised in the West. He imagines he couldn't even breathe the air east of Denver. So I had to leave Jim here."

"You left him where?" Pete cut in.

"I left him in a remote cabin up in the hills," Hoyle replied. "I put in bacon, flour, coffee, canned goods, sugar—everything a man could want. I stocked that cabin with enough whisky from Soda Springs to keep a ranch outfit drunk for a month. I thought erroneously, that it would last Jim till I returned." Hoyle laughed ruefully. "I was wrong. I hadn't properly estimated a drunkard's capacity for liquor."

Pete Rice's smoky-gray eyes were gleaming. Somehow he sensed that this story was going to help clean up the mystery that had lost him so much sleep recently.

"I wanted to keep Jim away from town," Hoyle continued. "I don't drink heavily myself. But I know how communicative some men get in liquor. Well, anyhow, I left for a flying trip to the East. I was successful back there. And the next time I saw Jim Weaver was back there at the stage-coach that day."

"When you pretended not to recognize him," Pete reminded the promoter.

"Of course. Jim had turned into a drooling, babbling, demented old fool. I could see he'd been beaten up. I could hear him babbling about gold. I wondered how much Jim had told. If he had gabbed too much, it was good-by to my fortune. Eastern syndicates have plenty of money and are sometimes free with it, but not until they have their experts analyze a proposition thoroughly. Those experts are due here this week—possibly in a day or so."

"So you wanted to be sure to keep Weaver under cover until your proposition was sealed up. Is that it, Hoyle?"

"That's it, exactly! It may have been a little irregular. And I was lucky. For you and your deputies had to trail that sniper, and left me alone with Weaver—except for Shorty Dunne, who drove the coach into town."

"You was lucky, all right," Pete said dryly. "I sure was ready to pump you plenty before them sniper's shots came. If a man out for success has one wish," he added, "he'd sure ought to wish to be lucky more than anything else."

Hoyle smiled his flashing smile. "Yes, I was lucky," he repeated. "I'd never have been able to put over that trick on you or your deputies. I thought I could do it on poor Dunne. I was successful."

"An' Weaver didn't recognize you?"

"No. You saw his condition, sheriff. So I kept away from him until the stage was almost ready to start in."

HOYLE took another puff of his cigarette and hurled the stub at a boulder. "I've criticized Jim. I've called him a drunkard—which is true. But I'm as fond of him as a son could be. If I get the snakes who hurt him, it won't be well for them. I have Jim in a cabin back in the hills now, and I'm nursing him back to health. I'll bet you a new hat, sheriff, that I do it, too. Seems as if you could use a new hat," he added.

He grinned up at the bullet hole in the crown of Pete's wide gray Stetson.

Then Hoyle's face grew serious again.

"There's one thing that's worrying me —plenty," he said. "I wonder if Jim, when he was drunk, *did* blab about our prospecting proposition."

Pete thought back to the time he had first seen old Weaver. It was obvious that Weaver had been held prisoner somewhere. Had some one got a hint of what was going to happen over near Soda Springs, and had beaten the story out of Weaver? Or had they beaten him and held him prisoner because Weaver would not come through with the whole secret?

The sheriff had ideas on the subject. Hoyle's story had thrown a big shaft of light on the Rangerville mystery.

"Well, we'll wait an' see about that, Hoyle," was the sheriff's non-committal answer.

His smoky-gray eyes studied Hoyle's keen face. "I'm a direct man, Hoyle. How do I know this yarn o' yours ain't some cock-an'-bull story to hide somethin' else?"

"Well, I can prove I'm on the side of the law, anyhow," Hoyle came back promptly. "Have you seen your deputy, Hicks, since he escaped?" He grinned knowingly.

"It was you——" Pete started.

"—that winged his captor and cut Hicks's bonds," Hoyle finished. "I'm with you and your deputies all the way through, sheriff. The only thing—I have to protect my own interests when I'm out for a fortune."

Pete's hard, bronzed hand went out and grasped the softer one of the promoter. "I'm sayin' you're all right, Hoyle! You probably saved Misery Hicks from death. I can never forget that."

Hoyle got to his feet. "All right for me to go, then?"

Pete nodded. "But when can I see Jim Weaver?"

"I can ride into town to-night and let you know how Jim's coming on. Maybe Jim'll be able to talk by then. I might have some real news."

"All right. An' thanks for that shot back there, Hoyle. That rattler might 'a' plugged me."

Hoyle shrugged his broad shoulders. "I told you I'm on the side of the law. I was coming over the rise and happened to see you. I got behind that boulder. I didn't want you to see me and trail me. Then that fellow tried to get you. I couldn't quite stand for that."

He shook hands with Pete again and walked toward his horse. Pete mounted Sonny.

The two men rode in different directions. Pete headed the sorrel back toward the trail where the sniper had tried to kill him. Hoyle loped diagonally across the rolling hills.

There was no sign of the injured sniper when Pete reached the boulders. The would-be killer had disappeared completely. But Pete took comfort in the thought that if he had stopped to bind the wounded man, he might not have caught Hoyle. And Hoyle's story had set his head buzzing with ideas.

He swung Sonny's head toward Blake's horse ranch again. "Near Soda Springs!" he muttered to himself. "Yep! It might be. It might be! An' if it is —then this case is danged near over!"

THERE was a yell from the direction of the stage road.

Pete turned in his saddle. Riders—there must have been half a dozen of them—were pounding along the road. Pete leveled his keen glance at them.

One of those riders was Teeny Butler. That big horse was unmistakable. The knee-action of the cayuse next to him indicated that it was Caballero, Misery Hicks's scrawny but speedy roan.

Pete reined back toward the stage road.

The riders came on with breakneck

speed. Pete gradually recognized the other riders. They were Hopi Joe, Farberson, Tom Rattigan, and Deputy Shorty Dunne, the Rangerville deputy.

The older men lagged a little behind, but they were doing their best to keep up. Farberson sank his spurs deep into the flanks of his horse and actually reached Pete a few yards before the younger men.

"Sheriff!" he yelled. "For Heaven's sake! Come along with us! The stage! The stage!"

Pete reached over and took the bridle of the hotel man's horse. He hauled the horse down to a stop. He could see that Farberson's face was working spasmodically. His eyes were more bloodshot than ever. The veins stood out on his temples like stout purple cords.

"Now, here, Mr. Farberson," Pete said, "you're too old to stand a strain like this. An' you ain't in the best o' health, anyhow. Take it a little easy. What stage? Let's get this straight. Tell me what we're up against. A second's delay or so can't mean anything."

Misery Hicks started to explain. But Farberson cut in on him.

"Get goin' Get goin', for Heaven's sake, Rice!" His voice was a pitiful scream. His face was the face of a man waiting for his own execution.

CHAPTER XIX.

POISONED WATER.

FARBERSON seemed like a man about to drop from an apoplectic stroke. In fact, as Pete's keen eyes saw, he was in some danger of that.

Pete put one of his big brown hands on the hotel keeper's arm to steady him.

"Something may happen to her!" Farberson mumbled. "She may be killed!"

"Now, wait a minute!" Pete snapped. "Give me this briefly. You think a stage is goin' to be held up. Got any idea what section? An' what stage? Your own new line, or the Rattigan line? We'll send these boys on ahead. I can catch them with Sonny. An' it don't matter if you don't catch up with 'em. Take it easy, now. You're in bad shape, Farberson."

"It might be—it might be near one o' the water holes!" Farberson gasped. "That's where the last two stages disappeared, didn't they? Maybe the Ten Mile Water Hole, or maybe the Midway Water Hole between there an' Wilcey Center."

His hand shook as he wiped his dripping brow. "I know the stage is well on the way. I got a wire from Wilcey Center. *An' my wife's on that stage!*"

"Which one? Your line or Rattigan's?"

"Rattigan's. If we don't hurry, sheriff——"

Pete put up his hand. "Wait!" He turned to the other riders. "Boys, you skedaddle ahead. I'll talk a minute with Mr. Farberson an' catch up with you. Keep right along the road till you meet that stage. Get goin', now!"

The riders, led by Teeny Butler, clattered away. Pete got Farberson down from his horse, settled him in a comfortable sitting position at the side of the road.

"How do you know your wife's on that stage, Farberson?" he asked.

"I got a telegram from the train, before it reached Wilcey Center. I told you my wife had been East, visitin'. Reckon she wanted to surprise me. I never even knew she was on her way back till I got that wire."

His lips trembled. Pete felt a wave of pity steal over him for this broken man. The sheriff recalled the strange love that the elderly hotel keeper had for his young, attractive wife.

"I wired right back to Wilcey Center. Told the hotel keeper there, a friend o' mine, to have Mrs. Farberson

stay at his place till I could get down there with a rig an' bring her back home in style. He wired back that she'd started—on the Rattigan stage!"

"But probably the stage'll get through all right," Pete said comfortingly. "Anyhow——"

He cut off. He saw that every second of delay only increased Farberson's dangerous nervous tension.

"All right, Farberson," he said, "I'll get goin'. You needn't come on, unless you insist. But if you do, take it easy. You're in no condition for hard ridin'."

Pete sprang on Sonny's back. "Now, don't worry," he said. "Everything'll probably be all right."

THEN Pete had Sonny in motion and was riding hard to catch up with his deputies. He looked back and saw that, despite his advice, Farberson was climbing on his horse and continuing. But within a couple of minutes Farberson's mount was screened by the cloud of dust kicked up by the flying heels of the sorrel.

As he galloped along at breakneck speed, Pete's jaws worked rapidly. He was chewing gum, and thinking. The holdup might be near one of the water holes, Farberson had said. Pete's face grew hard and grim. That was his own theory.

For since Hopi Joe had picked up those dead fish in Rock Creek the night before, Pete's active mind had been working. Rock Creek was an outlet of the Ten Mile Water Hole. And those dead fish had not been killed by blasting, as Hopi Joe had thought. They had died from poison in the water—poison which probably flowed down in the water from the Ten Mile Water Hole!

Misery's discovery of the two bodies in the one shallow grave had strengthened this theory of the sheriff's. Gawky Henderson, the stagecoach driver, had been slugged, his skull fractured. The old passenger had been knifed to death.

But that treatment wouldn't go for Tuffy McShane, one of the fiercest fighters in the county. And yet the bandits would not have dared to shoot McShane. The shots would be heard back in the near-by ghost-town.

McShane had been poisoned! Probably he had taken a drink of water from the poisoned water hole. It must have been that. And this was why the bandits had hidden McShane's body in some secluded place. The examination of his body would show the evidence of poison!

Pete's whole body was vibrant, tense, electrified. He seemed to emanate sparks of energy as he urged Sonny on to terrific speed. He sensed that the end of the mystery trail was in sight!

Sweat rolled down his brown, gaunt face. Sonny was in a lather. The day had turned unusually warm. The sun was a blaze of orange, setting the world on fire with dazzling lights. The stone spire that guarded the Ten Mile Water Hole was clearly picked out in the sunlight ahead. There was no sign of any irregularity there.

The road took a bend at that point. Pete's deputies and the other riders were not in sight. Evidently they had galloped on toward the Midway Water Hole, in the direction of Wilcey Center.

Pete passed the little huddle of shacks that was Last Hope, the ghost-town. His horse's hoofs thundered past the Ten Mile Water Hole. He veered into the turn toward Wilcey Center. His breakneck speed was unslackened.

The road ahead snaked around in several wide bends. The deputies were still not in sight, but Pete knew he would catch them. No horse in Trinchera County could match Sonny for speed. The sheriff whipped the sorrel around another of the bends—and pulled up sharply.

There was a man standing by the

side of the road. He stood over the fallen body of a piebald horse.

"Which way was you ridin', hombre?" Pete asked.

"From Wilcey Center," was the answer.

"Did you pass the Rattigan stagecoach?"

"Nope. I left 'fore the stage did, an' came straight on—until this happened."

"What's the trouble?"

The man pushed back his Stetson an' scratched his head. "Damned if I know," he said with a frown. "My cayuse just doubled up here an' flopped down."

Pete's mind was racing. His voice snapped out like the lash of a whip. "Where did you water your horse?"

"I give him a good drink back at the Midway Water Hole. Why?"

Pete did not answer the question. "Did you drink any water there yourself?"

In spite of his predicament, the man grinned. "Not me." He tapped a flask in his hip pocket. "I don't drink water—when I don't have to. Water's all right to wash in."

Pete put Sonny into full lope again. His theories had been borne out again. The Midway Water Hole had been poisoned. Then that must be where the bandits planned to pull their holdup of the Rattigan stage! And the Midway Water Hole was still a good four miles ahead.

"Come on, Sonny!" Pete urged. He gave the sorrel a slight prod of his spurs.

SONNY rounded a turn. Far ahead, making the next turn, Pete could pick out a cloud of dust that must be Teeny, Misery and the other riders he had sent on ahead. He soon overtook them.

Rattigan was falling a little behind, but the others swooped ahead like hawks, intent on their prey.

The killing pace continued. The miles sped by. Within a mile of the Midway Water Hole turn, Pete led the cavalcade over on the south turf at the side of the road. The beat of the horses' hoofs would be partly muffled there.

For Pete Rice had an idea of what to expect when they rounded that turn. If the stagecoach had been waylaid near the water hole, guards would be stationed at both ends of the road.

The riders rounded the turn. Pete had led the way back into the road now. He knew that if the bandits were there, the hoofbeats would have been heard by this time.

A good twenty yards ahead of his nearest man, Pete pulled Sonny around the curve.

Bang! A masked man sitting his horse under a cottonwood tree let fly with his .45. The bullet came close. But Pete's .45 was in his hand. Before the masked man could fire again, he toppled from his saddle into the road.

Another gun flamed from behind the cottonwood tree. Shorty Dunne's horse went down. It lay in the road, kicking and rolling its eyes.

Pete put a merciful shot through its brain.

Shorty ran for shelter, but the gun behind the cottonwood tree barked again.

Shorty staggered, then pitched forward. He tried to get up, got to his knees. His gun was wabbling in his hand. Then he flopped back prostrate into the roadway.

Pete ran over to him. Teeny and Misery were riding straight at the man behind the cottonwood tree. Their guns were barking.

The man behind the tree let out a yowl. Then his gun was heard no more.

Pete lifted up the limp form of Deputy Shorty Dunne. The deputy's eyes were open. So was his mouth. "Get

'em, Pete, old boy!" he murmured. "I'm bettin'——"

His mouth shut tight. He was a dead weight in Pete's arms. The sheriff looked down mournfully at his dead face. Shorty had been no wizard mentally. He had used bad judgment at times, and talked rather indiscreetly. But Shorty Dunne was game—a man. He had lived that way. He had died that way.

Pete carried the body to the grass at the side of the road. Then he was back in the fight again.

The scene toward the water hole was about as he had expected. The stagecoach was stopped. One of the horses still sagged in the harness. A buckboard was drawn close to it, and evidently wheels carried by the buckboard were being put on the jacked-up stagecoach. But this time the tricksters had been surprised at their job.

A mass of masked riders were spurring hard from the direction of the stagecoach. They had seen that the odds were in their favor; they had seen one of the deputies already fall; they would wipe out the rest of the party. At least, that was their intention.

All were well-heeled—armed with .45s. One of them carried a rifle across the saddle in front of him. He raised it.

And when Pete heard that first report, which missed him narrowly, he knew that he had to put *this* rider out of action at once. For the gun was an automatic rifle.

Pete took careful aim; fired. The man with the automatic rifle took a tumble from the side of his saddle. He landed headfirst on the hard road. But that fall didn't hurt him. He was dead before he landed.

Pete Rice had made a perfect center shot. This was no time for fooling.

The bandits still had a big edge, though. Two of them toppled from their saddles as the guns of Misery and Teeny flamed, and a third dropped his .45 and clapped his hand to his neck as old Tom Rattigan sent a stream of fire from his gun.

Hopi Joe got a fourth. The Indian had leaped from his pony and was taking advantage of the shelter of the cottonwoods at the side of the road.

Pete Rice thought he saw a chance to end the battle quickly. He spurred Sonny, leaned far out to one side of the saddle, scooped up the automatic rifle from the ground.

The remaining bandits saw this maneuver—and knew what it meant. They whirled their horses and fled. One of them turned in his saddle. The muzzle of his gun spat flame.

Old Tom Rattigan sagged in his saddle. He did not fall to the ground. "Don't mind me, boys!" he yelled. "Only in the shoulder! Get after them rattlers!"

And the Buzzard Gap deputies and Hopi Joe were already after them. Teeny and Misery had already lined out and were off the road after the fleeing horsemen. But Pete Rice rode toward the stage.

PETE was wondering if the woman, Wade Farberson's wife, was still in the stage. He noticed two forms sprawled out, one on the seat and one on the road beside the right front wheel. The express guard and the driver, evidently; apparently both dead.

Pete looked through the window of the coach. There was no one inside. And yet there was a faint odor of perfume. And in a corner of the seat Pete's keen eyes discovered a woman's hand bag.

Mrs. Farberson—or, anyhow, some woman—must have started from Wilcey Center with the stage. But where had she disappeared to? Pete could only hope that the bandits had been gallant enough to let her off the coach be-

fore they started their preparations for the coach's disappearance.

He neckreined Sonny back toward the box of the stage, examined the body sprawled on the seat. The man had been slugged terrifically over the head. His skull was crushed. He was dead. The body was evidently that of Bran Larrsen, for the driver, who lay face up on the road, was Swen Lindstrom.

Lindstrom was not dead. His ice-blue eyes were rolling in pain, and his big body was writhing.

Pete dismounted and knelt beside him. "Can you talk at all, Lindstrom?" he asked.

Lindstrom nodded, but he did not speak. Pete felt certain that the big, blond-haired driver had been poisoned by drinking from the Midway Water Hole.

"You took a drink at the water hole?" Pete asked.

Lindstrom nodded again. "A few mouthfuls," he said, writhing in pain again.

Pete looked up as three or four riders thundered around the bend from the direction of Wilcey Center. They had been attracted by the shots and were coming fast. They looked like ranchers.

"Anybody hurt?" one of them yelled. Then he saw the still forms on the ground.

Pete eased Lindstrom's shirt band. He had liked the big, blond driver since first meeting him in Rangerville. He wanted to take after the fleeing bandits. But possibly Lindstrom's life could be saved. The big fellow looked as if he might have the recuperative powers of an animal. He had taken only a small drink at the water hole, and might be able to throw off the effects of the poison.

"Any o' you men got any whisky on you?" Pete asked one of the newcomers.

"Betcher life!" was the retort of one of them, who reached back and drew a flask from a hip pocket.

"This man has been poisoned," Pete explained, pointing down to Lindstrom. "Pour that liquor down his throat. Pour it down till he chokes. Give him all of it. Make him sick, if you can. I've got to get after them bandits. An' one o' you men ride back to Wilcey Center for a doctor."

The sheriff took quick command of the situation. "Rest o' you stay here. This stage is carryin' gold. Them bandits might try to come back. There's a man over on a roan hoss back there. He ain't a bandit. He's Tom Rattigan, owner o' the stage line. See what you can do for him. He's shot in the shoulder."

Pete's keen gray eyes flicked along the road beside the coach. He was trying to find the print of a woman's shoe on the rocky ground.

There was a clatter of hoofs to the rear. Pete turned. Wade Farberson, looking more apoplectic than ever, rode up on his blown horse.

"Is she here?" he bellowed. "Is she hurt? Anybody see my wife? Did you get here in time, sheriff? Did you find her?"

The words rapped out like bullets from a gun.

Pete didn't answer. He had noticed the fresh trail of a saddle horse leading from the stage toward Wilcey Center.

"Any o' you men seen a woman along here?" he asked of the ranchers.

"Sure thing," one of them replied. "Blind John Blake was takin' her to Wilcey Center. She'd been nicked a little in the stage holdup, Blake said. He was in a hell of a hurry. He had her right up in the saddle with him. She seemed unconscious."

Farberson let out a wail. He almost fell from his saddle.

But Pistol Pete Rice had leaped upon Sonny's back and was pounding toward Wilcey Center.

CHAPTER XX.

SHOWDOWN!

THE sheriff knew only too well that Blake was not making for Wilcey Center with the woman. Blake had been one of the masked men up there near the stage—quite possibly the leader.

He had taken advantage of the fight down the road a piece to make off with the passenger, possibly to hold her as a hostage against his own safety.

Blake was keen; Pete Rice admitted that much. The supposedly blind man had seen the ranchers approaching, attracted by the shots. He had ripped off his mask and told them a convincing story about going to a doctor with the woman. His standing in the community made them swallow the story.

The fresh trail of his horse was easy for Pete to follow. As the sheriff had thought, it switched sharply away from the Wilcey Center Road a few hundred yards from the stagecoach.

But Blake had a good start and was riding desperately. He had probably picked the most rugged horse in the bunch to carry double. The country was a series of undulating hills, and although Pete sent Sonny along at top speed, he could not catch a glimpse of his quarry.

One thing was plainly apparent, though. Blake was heading for the cliff country near Rock Creek which the sheriff and Hopi Joe had explored the night before. That was where the other bandits were heading for, most likely. This was to be their last stand. They would show their hands now. And Pete Rice would call them.

The terrain ascended a little more sharply and became rockier. The trail was not as easy to follow. But Pete Rice's eyes were gimlet keen, in the bright light he could discern the steel-scarred path of Blake's mount.

At the top of the third next rise he could make out a rider that he believed to be Blake himself. The rider, in a peculiar position due to the extra person he carried in the saddle, was cutting cross-country, due north.

From his elevated position Pete could also see two clusters of riders to the west of Blake. He believed the three horsemen in the rear to be his deputies and Hopi Joe, and the ones in advance to be the fleeing bandits. The pursuers were drawing closer, and the next second Pete saw puffs of smoke and heard the dim reports of .45s.

The sheriff knew that Blake would beat him to the bandit hide-out now. But that did not discourage him. For Pete had figured out something the night before.

That *ping!* following his shot at the cliff, had told him something. It told him why the bandits had been able to disappear so mysteriously in that rocky country. They had some sort of cave. The entrance must be a metal door, painted to resemble rock. The bullet had happened to strike this metal door. Pete knew just where to find that spot again.

He saw that Blake would make the shelter before the deputies could get him. But the deputies were emptying an occasional saddle. Then Pete lost sight of them as he raced Sonny down through a canyon and up through a path screened by giant boulders.

Before he got a glimpse of his deputies and the bandits again, he heard a number of shots. He guessed that most of the bandits had gained the shelter of the cavern and were giving battle.

THIS proved to be the case when Pete finally reined up Sonny by the side of the creek he had ridden through the night before with Hopi Joe and Teeny.

The deputies and the Indian tracker had stampeded their horses downstream

and had selected shelter back of boulders.

Pete dismounted, slapped Sonny on the flank to get him out of the danger zone, and raced for the boulders.

A gun belched from the direction of the cave, and Misery and Teeny gave return fire. There were two sharp *pings*. The bandit in the cave was evidently sliding the painted iron door just enough to sight his gun through the opening.

Pete flung himself behind a boulder next to Misery Hicks.

"By jaspers!" Misery said. "Wonder how we can get 'em out o' their hole, boss?"

There was a flash from the direction of the cave, and Pete's gun spat flame. Its report was followed by a yowl of pain. The sheriff's bullet had gone through the small slit made by the partly opened iron door.

"It's their last stand," Pete told Misery. "They know they're cornered. We'll get them birds now if we have to starve 'em out. How many of 'em are left?"

"I'd guess about half a dozen," Misery answered. "Teeny drilled one on the way up here. I nicked another in the shoulder, but he kept goin' an' got under cover in there."

Pete stared up at the cliff. It was blank and gray. Sparse vegetation was scattered about it. A narrow trail threaded its way down the face of it. But it looked too precarious for human footing.

There was the sound of hoofbeats, and Pete turned.

Wade Farberson, his face like a death mask, galloped up and dismounted behind the boulders. There was a shot from the cavern, and the hotel man's horse went down. It was kicking spasmodically.

Pete Rice put a bullet through the suffering animal's brain. But Farberson seemed not to notice it.

"My wife!" he said. "Did they take her in there?"

Pete nodded. "They haven't harmed her. But you have yourself to blame for all this, Farberson. You thought you could beat the law, didn't you?"

The sheriff's big hand went into his pocket. When it came out, it clutched a pair of handcuff. Pete reached over. There was a click, and Farberson was helpless. Then Pete plucked the .45 from Farberson's holster.

Teeny and Misery stared. Even the impassive face of Hopi Joe showed an expression of astonishment.

Pete Rice answered their unasked question. "Yep. Farberson was back of all this terror around this neck o' the woods," he explained. "An' right now he's payin' the price. He broke the law to build up a fortune. Now, the one person he loves is in danger."

Farberson made no denial. He crouched there silently, his bloodshot eyes staring at the iron door of the cave.

The contest between the lawmen and the bandits had degenerated into a sort of armed truce. Occasionally a shot from the cave chipped a boulder near Pete or his deputies. But the lawmen did not fire back. They had the bandits where they wanted them. It was a case of out-waiting them.

Pete Rice turned to Hopi Joe. "Joe," he said, "you know where them miners got the settlement on the lower part o' Rock Creek?"

Joe nodded.

"I reckon there's only one thing to do," Pete told him. "There must be some sticks o' dynamite in that miners' settlement. Ease down along these boulders. Get to your pony. And——"

A gasp from Misery Hicks brought the sheriff's attention back to the cliff. "Look, boss!" Misery exclaimed.

But Pete had already seen. A figure was slipping down the narrow trail threaded along the cliff.

"By golly! It's that loco old man!" Misery said.

IT was. It was Jim Weaver. He had something in his hand. He was holding it high.

At first Pete could not make out the intention of Weaver. If the old man kept down that trail, he would end up in front of that iron door. He would be an easy target for the bandits inside the cave if they slid the door open a couple of inches.

Pete stood up. "Weaver!" he yelled. "Be careful. Go back!"

A gun blasted from the direction of the cave. Pete's wide gray hat was whipped from his head. He ducked back behind the boulder. But peering out, he divined Weaver's intention.

The old man was on a ledge almost directly above the iron door. His arm came up higher. Something dropped from it. The missile struck just in front of the iron door.

Boom! The report was deafening. A shower of split rock geysered into the air.

Old Weaver's hand went into his pocket. He dropped another missile. *Boom!* There was another shower of rock.

Pete knew now that the battle was about over. Weaver, the old hard-rock man, must have heard the shots from his cabin. He had crimpered some sticks of dynamite, had run to the scene of battle. He must be practically recovered now, for he had taken in the situation at a glance.

Another explosion came. Pete saw the iron door torn from its hinges. The terrific force of the explosion lifted it like a pebble, sent it jangling down the rocky cliff. The way into the cave was open.

Two bandits appeared inside the door of the cave. They were making a desperate stand now. Their guns flamed. Lead spattered viciously against the lawmen's shelter of boulders.

Teeny fired back. One of the bandits flopped to the ground, was pulled inside the cave by his luckier companion.

"Take it easy, boys!" Pete ordered. "Wait a minute. Then we'll rush the cave. Shootin' from here, we might hit the woman. We can't take a chance on that!"

There was a groan from the handcuffed Farberson by his side. "Save her, sheriff!" the hotel man pleaded. "Save her! I'll tell everything! I'll make a full confession. Just see that she's safe. She's the only person in the whole world that I love!"

Pete paid no attention to him, except to tell Hopi Joe to watch him. Joe had been engaged to trail, not to fight.

The sheriff led his deputies across fifteen dangerous feet to the shelter of the next big boulder. Bullets nicked the rock all about them, but they made the shelter and poured a stream of lead toward the cave.

"Hold it!" Pete yelled. "Hold your fire!"

For a man had appeared at the open mouth of the cave. It was Blake. But Blake was taking no chance. He held the woman in his arms.

"Come out, Blake!" Pete yelled. "You ain't got a chance."

Blake continued to hold the woman as a shield in front of him. "I ain't, huh?" he yelled. "Well, I reckon I have!"

"Throw down your guns!" Pete rapped out. "We got you an' your men dead to rights."

"You may get *them!*" was the retort. "But you ain't got *me!* You're lettin' me get to my hoss. If you try to take me alive, I'll kill this woman! Think it over," he added calmly.

Farberson had leaped to his feet. "You harm a hair of her head, Blake, an' I'll kill you if it's the last thing I do on earth!" he raved. "Rush him, sher-

iff. Get him, for Heaven's sake!"

Blake still stood there calmly. His voice boomed out. "Farberson, you rotten, double-crossin' skunk!" There was deadly hatred in his voice. "So you framed the holdup an' then got cold feet, did you! You got the sheriff on our trail. You thought *you'd* get clear in that way, if *we* was killed, did you?"

"I didn't!" Farberson flung back. "It was only after I found my wife was ridin' in the stage that—— Oh, John! John! We've been good friends, you an' me——"

"Friends!" Blake flung back. "A hell of a friend you turned out to be! You got your neck in the noose right now. But you'll pay even more than that. There's nothin' too bad for a skunk like you! I'll show you I mean business, Farberson! I'll show you!"

His hand darted downward, closed on the butt of his .45. Before he could use the gun, Pete Rice's weapon spoke.

Blake swayed, tottered. But his gun was pressed to the woman's head. There was a report. Both bodies hit the ground together.

WITHIN a split-second, the lawmen were rushing toward the mouth of the cave. Four bandits inside the cave had thrown down their guns. Their hands were elevated.

"We give up!" they yelled.

"Hog-tie them rattlers, boys!" Pete snapped. Then he was kneeling over the form of the woman.

She was not quite dead. But Pete Rice, who had looked upon violent death so often, knew that it was a matter of minutes, possibly seconds.

Blake was stretched out—dead. There was a mocking smile on his face. Pete Rice's bullet had got him in a vital spot. But even after that, Blake had been able to pull the trigger, to shoot the wife of the former friend he had come to hate.

Farberson had broken away from Hopi Joe. The hotel man was in a frenzy. He reached the side of his dead wife, tried to kneel down beside her. His knees buckled under him. He fell across her dead body. He was still conscious. His lips were pressed to her dead cheek.

He raised up. There was a world of agony, of anguish, in his bloodshot eyes.

"Take the handcuffs off a minute, sheriff," he pleaded. "Let me embrace her. I'll tell everything. Life holds nothing for me any more. I'm finished —through!"

He started sobbing hysterically.

Teeny and Misery had herded the four prisoners outside of the cave. Misery held them under his gun, while Teeny Butler bound them with piggin strings which he always carried in his pockets.

There was a scuff of boots on the trail which wound down from the cliff toward the mouth of the cave. Pete looked up. Old Weaver and Walter Hoyle were coming down the trail.

Even in the midst of death, Hoyle was debonair. "This old coot Weaver got away from me," he called out. "I trailed him here. You passed our cabin a little while ago, sheriff. It's hidden in them pines back from the trail. Jim got some sticks o' dynamite an' got away from me. I trailed him here."

Pete looked up at the face of Weaver. That insane light was no longer in the old man's eyes.

"They tell me I went loco," Weaver said. "But I reckon I made a good shot with that dynamite, huh?"

He faced Farberson. "An' *you* was the pole-cat that had me kidnaped an' almost killed." His hand went into his pocket.

Pete flung himself at the old man. The old fellow was like a child in his hands.

Pete drew out three sticks of dynamite, laid them gently on the ground. "You take care o' Weaver, Hoyle," he told the promoter. Then, to Teeny and

Misery: "Bring the bodies o' them bandits out here. Take the body o' Mrs. Farberson, place it in the cave an' put a blanket over it."

He turned to Farberson. "I've seen crooks an' killers pay for their crimes," he said. "In fact, I don't recall that any ever escaped, in the long run. But I never seen a man pay more than you have. I'm sorry for you, Farberson. But you're goin' to swing."

Farberson seemed in a daze. He did not object when the body of his wife was carried reverently into the cave and laid down gently. He looked on blankly as the bandits' bodies were placed less gently outside the cave.

"You'll find the missin' stagecoaches in that cave," he said to Pete Rice. "Them an' the gold that was stolen. I'd give all the gold in the West if I could hear my wife's voice once more. I'm the unhappiest man on the face o' the earth."

A tremor ran through his gaunt frame. He looked twenty years older. He put his face in his hands and sobbed like a child.

CHAPTER XXI.

FARBERSON'S CONFESSION.

PETE RICE had removed the handcuffs from Farberson so that the hotel man might put his arms about his dead wife. There was sadness in the sheriff's smoky-gray eyes. There always was, in the presence of death.

And for once, Pete Rice felt a trifle shaky. Raised in the West, the only son of a loving mother, he had been taught to revere women. Nothing had ever quite affected him like this cold-blooded murder of a good woman by the venomous Blake.

Farberson was still sobbing. It was the only noise except the scuff of the deputies' boots as they carried out wooden chests from the stage and stacked them on the rocky ground near the creek.

"Come over here, men," Pete ordered. "I reckon this case is over. You heard what Farberson said—that he was willin' to confess everything. He don't have to. I know he's guilty, anyhow. I got the goods on him."

"By jaspers!" Misery Hicks exclaimed. "You never told us nothin' about your suspicions."

Pete reached in his pocket for an oblong of gum. He crumpled it and shoved it into his mouth. He started to chew slowly, reflectively.

"I've had Farberson under suspicion for some time," the sheriff said. "O' course, I couldn't be certain. The only thing, generally, that an hombre can be certain of, is death. But after my talk with Hoyle, I knew Farberson's neck was goin' to fit into a noose."

He chewed his gum for a moment. "I don't believe in talkin' too much. Men that have the most to say use the fewest words. But when Hoyle told me he'd discovered gold *near Soda Springs,* an' that he reckoned the secret had got out, through Weaver here—well, I started puttin' two an' two together."

"I'd never told it," Jim Weaver put in, "unless this skunk, Farberson, got me drunk."

"An' when he got you drunk, what happened, Weaver?" Pete asked.

"Gosh! It's all kind o' hazy in my mind. I remember Farberson pumpin' me. He give me a fine room in his hotel. He asked if all the claims was filed. I told him they was. An' the next thing I knew, I was passin' out from liquor—an' when I woke up I was hog-tied in some barn, an' my head was achin' terrible."

Farberson still seemed in a daze. Weaver glared at him, but the hotel man's eyes were riveted upon the ground.

"That's what I figured," Pete said.

"Whisky's like a hypocrite—a nice, pleasant hombre to your face; makes you believe your friends; but later—look out!"

He chewed his gum and continued: "You see, boys, as soon as Farberson pumped Jim Weaver here, he thought he seen a way o' cleanin' up a fortune. He wasn't out for the gold itself. But he knew if he could get hold o' the Peters Stage Line, he'd make a fortune.

"It'd be maybe a couple o' years before that boom town near Soda Springs could put up stamp mills. Meanwhile, there'd be freight hauls into Rangerville. An' the trek o' miners in there 'ud make some right fine passenger business. That's what Farberson had his eye on."

Farberson had quit his sobbing. He raised up, looked at Pete Rice. "So you knew, did you?" he asked.

"I knew," Pete replied. He pointed an accusing finger at the hotel man. "An' that's why you killed Peters, Farberson!"

Farberson was his old self for a moment. "You can't prove it!" he yelled.

"Maybe not," Pete admitted. "But I don't have to. I got enough else on you."

There was an overwhelming silence. The men were ringed in an awed circle about the semiprone figure of Ferberson. Wade Farberson, the hotel keeper. Wade Farberson, the public-spirited citizen. Wade Farberson, the murderer!

"Ferberson," Pete said, "I know why you done all this. You done it for your wife. She was a good woman. She was a lot younger than you; a lot more educated; a lot higher socially."

The sheriff chewed his gum for a few seconds. "When a man marries a woman a lot younger or more upper-crust than himself," he said, "he generally finds that the woman's more anxious to preserve the distance between 'em than to bring him up to her grade or to go down to his."

Once more Pete Rice pointed an accusing finger at the hotel man. "But I reckon," he said, "that you know the details more than I do. If you want to tell 'em, go ahead. If not, we'll start back to town."

FARBERSON was still for a few minutes, as though trying to collect the disrupted remnants of his mind. His expression was fatalistic. He did not care what happened now.

He was no longer a sobbing, shaken creature. His bloodshot eyes took in the group of men ringed about him. He felt no fear of their fury. He had no worries; if he ever had worried about the career of crime he had launched himself into, that period was past.

His feeble figure shook a trifle, like a slender tree swayed by a slight breeze.

Pete watched his face. The skin on his forehead was like old parchment. Tiny pulses throbbed in his temples. He spoke at first with closed eyes. His voice trailed faintly across the thin, blue lips.

"Things begin strange sometimes," he said. His eyes opened, took in the group.

"I don't know if you hombres know it," he said, "but I ain't got long to live. 'Cardiac pressure,' the doc calls it. Reckon we'd call it just plain heart trouble."

Pete Rice had guessed it long before. He recalled the bloodshot eyes from the first time he had seen Farberson; the shortness of breath.

"My wife never suspected it," Farberson went on. "I couldn't let her worry. An' I never told her how bad business was gettin'. My money was goin'. The hotel ain't been a success for the last two-three years, an'—well, I reckon I just lost my head."

He swallowed hard, continued: "I knew that if I died, my wife would be

left in want. I couldn't have that happen. I was desperate. I looked for a way to get some money—big money. Then, one day, this feller"—he nodded at old Jim Weaver—"wandered into town an' put up at my hotel."

Jim Weaver started to rise as though to strike the hotel man. Hoyle pulled the old fellow back to his seat on the ground.

"Jim proved to be a drinker o' hard liquor. I didn't pay much attention to him at first. But he started talkin'. It was about some mysterious gold strike. I knew the changes in fortunes gold strikes had made before. I took Jim into my settin' room. I got him good an' drunk. An' the drunker I got him the more he talked."

Farberson went on with details that Pete Rice had already guessed—of how Weaver had told him of the location of the gold claims; of how his partner, Walter Hoyle, had gone back East to get capital.

"I had an idea you was pumpin' me," Weaver cut in. "I didn't tell you all of it, at that, did I?"

Farberson shook his head. "Nope. Next mornin' I tried to get the rest o' the story out o' Weaver. But he knew he'd talked too much. He shut his mouth—tight. But I'd seen my opportunity. I slugged him with the butt of a gun. Then I figured I'd keep him prisoner some place out o' town till he'd come through."

"An' you selected John Blake's place," Pete Rice said.

Farberson nodded. "Yep. I knew John Blake well. I knew him in Texas before I came to Trinchera County, years ago. He'd been chased out o' Texas, an' I had a little somethin' on him—quite a little."

"You knew that he wasn't blind, for one thing," Pete reminded the hotel keeper.

"Yep. That's true enough. Blake always had an ace in the hole. He always wanted an advantage that the other hombre never knew he had.

"Well, we'd been in some deals together, Blake an' me. He was workin' with that feller in Buzzard Gap—that Brainstedt o' the Circle Cross spread. It was small-fry stuff. Brainstedt rustled cattle an' hosses, an' Blake sold 'em. They even holed up the animals in that cave over there. They drove 'em downstream, an' then over these rocks. No trail. That was after Blake found the cave an' thought o' that trick o' the iron door."

"An' you showed him how you could work a bigger game—get control o' the Peters Stage Line."

"I did. Blake had the men. He'd known some in Texas an' some in New Mexico. Most of 'em thought they was workin' for Blake, not for me. An' Blake had brains. I got to give him that much credit. It was him thought o' makin' the stagecoaches disappear."

"That's the part that puzzled me a little," Pete admitted.

"Well," Farberson explained, "we talked it over plenty, Blake an' me. Just plain holdups wouldn't do. Blake said that Rattigan was only a newcomer in the stage business. He didn't have a long bank-roll. He couldn't hold out very long.

"We figured to terrorize folks from ever takin' the Rattigan stages as passengers, or sendin' freight over it. We aimed to do somethin' extreme. An' I'd like to get that Tom Rattigan is on his last legs now—financially, that is."

Farberson cleared his throat and went on.

I GOT into the thing deeper than I planned at first. I reckoned I could buy out Horace Peters for a small price, because Horace was gettin' old. But when I first mentioned it to Horace, it didn't seem so easy. Horace had been runnin' them stage lines for years. He said as how he'd die in the harness."

"Which is why you killed him, Farberson—an' planted evidence that 'ud point to Tom Rattigan."

"Well, I don't like to talk about it much. But nothin' matters now. Yep, I killed him. That was Blake's idea, too. We had a clear field then. We knew the gold strike near Soda Springs would prove a bonanza for whoever owned the stage line an' freight-wagon line that could hold out. By puttin' Rattigan out o' business, me an' Blake 'ud have a monopoly."

Pete chewed his gum. Much that the elderly man was telling him he already knew. But he let Farberson tell about how he had invited old Horace Peters to his hotel, how Farberson had gone outside a moment, shot Peters through the window, and then run back into the room and given himself a slight wound to take any possible suspicion away from himself.

"An' got rid o' your gun in some way to Blink Watson," Pete put in.

"Yep, you're right there. I had it arranged with Blink. I threw the gun out the window. Blink disposed of it. An' later, if you remember, Blink went out back o' the window to track over the trail."

Pete recalled the body of Blink Watson with a .44 cartridge in the skull, when no one on the held-up stagecoach carried a .44. It was obvious that Watson was killed later, to guard against a loose tongue when drunk.

"Well," Farberson went on, "we thought we had a hundred per cent plan. We had the cave to hide the stages in. We figured out a way, or rather Blake did, to have them disappear without a trace. We wanted to make as much mystery as possible. We couldn't fire any shots. Shots might be heard."

"So you poisoned the water holes in advance."

Farberson nodded. "Yep. Blake trapped wild hosses in New Mexico for two-three years. He knew all about the quantino weed, that the Injuns said was rank poison for a man an' that 'ud make a hoss drunk, as they called it."

Pete Rice knew of the quantino weed. It grew in New Mexico and parts of Arizona and Old Mexico. It would result in a serious loss of breath and possible death, even if taken in small quantities by humans. In larger doses, it was sure death. Paralysis often preceded death.

It had a peculiar effect on horses, seldom killing them, but making them "drunk" as the Indians claimed, paralyzing their muscles.

"We got hold o' lots o' the weed an' boiled it down. We managed to dilute the water at the water holes with just the right proportion. We done that by havin' a man doctor the water about ten minutes before a stage drew up. Naturally, the hosses 'ud be watered. Usual, the driver an' shotgun-guard 'ud take a drink."

"Did you have the effect o' the poison timed?" Pete asked.

"Well, in a general way. But the way it worked with that first stage was a good piece o' luck. It happened that the hosses collapsed right between Last Hope an' Placer. The stage was seen to pass one huddle o' shacks, an' disappear within a couple o' miles. Yep, that was a piece o' luck."

"Yep, a piece o' luck," Pete echoed grimly. "Bad luck—that'll send you an' these others to the gallows."

BUT Farberson seemed to feel no terror. He went on with his story. In the case of the first stagecoach, he explained, the passenger—John Blake's man—had seen to it that Tuffy McShane took a drink of whisky. He had studied Tuffy McShane's habits. Tuffy was seldom known to refuse a drink of whisky, but he always took a chaser with it.

Tuffy was the man the old passenger was afraid of. For Tuffy was a hard

hombre. He could not be slugged over the head. He would fight to the death. But the treacherous poison had rendered even Tuffy McShane harmless.

"Then that's why Tuffy McShane's body wasn't in with the other two," Misery Hicks cut in.

"That's it," Farberson admitted calmly. "We couldn't chance McShane's body bein' discovered. A *post-mortem* 'ud show how he'd been killed. That would have given away our secret. Henderson didn't drink any o' the water, but Henderson was easy. Blake's man, the passenger, slugged him, soon as McShane was out o' the way."

"An' then why was the passenger killed?" Pete asked. "You an' Blake couldn't even play fair with your own killers, eh?"

"Well, call it what you like. The passenger was one o' Blake's men. An' it was Blake that killed him, with a knife. Blake said the old feller had a habit o' talkin' too much. Blake wasn't no hombre to take chances that way, so he done him in."

"You double-crossed Blink Watson, too," Pete said.

"We figured you already had Watson under suspicion. So when we decided to stage a holdup on the Peters coach—we couldn't always have it Rattigan's at first; we had to make things look good—we reckoned we'd better get Blink out o' the way."

Again Pete Rice's face was grim. "An' back in Buzzard Gap, you reckoned you'd better get me out o' the way, didn't you, Farberson?"

"Might as well admit it," was the answer. "I figured that if I was the one that rode over to tell you about the stage, you wouldn't be like to suspect me. An' Blake had been workin' on Brainstedt to snipe you while I was talkin' with you in front o' the window. That's why I got up to look at that map o' Trinchera County—to get out o' the line of fire."

"It might have been better for you if you'd been killed then, Farberson," Pete reminded him. "But Brainstedt couldn't go through with it, after all, could he?"

"No. Blake sort o' foreseen that. He had another man planted there. He knew Brainstedt couldn't be depended on in anything big. So the other sniper, after he failed to get you, shot Brainstedt when he was gettin' away. In that way, Brainstedt couldn't let Blake out."

"You might as well come clean," Pete told the hotel man. "I s'pose it was you an' Blake back o' them bank robberies at Red Mesa an' Silver Creek."

Farberson calmly admitted it. "We was in deep by that time," he said. "I didn't know how cheap I could pick up the Peters Stage Line. I figured to be sure to have enough money by gettin' it that way. You was too clever for us, sheriff. So Blake told me last night that you was goin' to get yours to-day. He had two-three men planted about the county, ready to give it to you."

"That accounts for the ranny snipin' at me this mornin'," Pete said. "Well, you sure made big plans, Farberson. You see where they led to."

Farberson gulped, swallowed hard. He was silent for a moment. He seemed to be living over again the scenes of the past couple of hours.

"Maybe there's somethin' in that sayin' that the wages o' sin is death," he said. "When I found my wife was on that stage we was goin' to stick up, I died a thousand deaths when I was ridin' to meet you. I didn't care what happened to me then. I never thought o' myself. It was my wife's safety was on my mind all the time. An' now, she's—she's gone——"

His voice trailed away to a whisper. A tremor passed through his frail body again.

"I want to see my wife's body again before she's moved," he pleaded. "Only once more. I want to——"

WITH surprising agility, Farberson had bounded to his feet. His hand shot out at the sticks of dynamite that Pete had placed a few feet away. In an instant, he had one of the crimpered sticks in his hand and was running for the cave.

Hopi Joe's .45 came up. "Don't shoot!" Pete ordered. "If he drops, he's liable to blow us all up. An' we want to save him for the noose, anyhow."

Farberson had turned, was looking over his shoulder. Pete's first thought was that the doomed man had meant to hurl the stick of dynamite at his captors. But Farberson headed straight into the cave. He turned at the entrance.

"Don't follow me!" he yelled. "Give me a minute alone—with—my wife."

Almost before he had finished yelling, Pete realized his intention. He saw Farberson's arm go back.

Boom!

The explosion rocked the earth. The cave seemed to split asunder and leap heavenward. There was a blinding flash—there was a shower of rock—then particles of granite and earth rained on the ground.

There was silence. And a lifting screen of dust.

Pistol Pete Rice stared at the mass of jumbled granite and earth. After all, Wade Farberson had paid the price. He had been a broken man, a man who faced the noose.

Misery turned to the sheriff. "What's the next move, boss?" he asked.

Pete was silent for a moment. Then he said: "You gents wait here. We got to get a buckboard. I'll ride back to the stage road. I'll send a buckboard back here to take in our cargo."

It was a queer cargo—stolen gold and dead men.

Rattigan's stagecoaches, buried in the avalanche of rock, would never be recovered, but that would be a small matter to Tom Rattigan now. Rattigan would have a clear field before him. He could build up his stage line, could make a snug fortune when the news about the gold strike near Soda Springs got out.

Pete mounted Sonny and rode back toward the part of the stagecoach road where he had surprised the bandits in their attempted holdup.

He had been through a strenuous campaign. But the mystery had been cleared up.

THERE was a big crowd of men around the stagecoach when Pete Rice rode up on Sonny. A doctor had arrived. Swen Lindstrom would live, he reported. Tom Rattigan had been taken to Wilcey Center in a buggy, and would be as good as new within a few weeks.

"I got to get hold of a buckboard," Pete announced. "I got a cargo to take

Go with Pistol Pete Rice, fearless sheriff of Trinchera County, and his two deputies, Teeny and Misery, into Grama Valley—the valley that becomes known as *Dead Men's Valley*. Murder rides through it, rough shod; false testimony, evil plots, avaricious desires—these fill Grama Valley with evil, with danger and death. Get your next copy of PETE RICE MAGAZINE from your local dealer—it's ten cents at all news stands.

in to Rangerville—the body o' Shorty Dunne an' them bandits we had to plug."

Two or three of the men offered to scour the road for a buckboard. When they got it, Pete Rice would ride back to the cave with it.

Pete yawned. To-night, he hoped, he would sleep in his mother's home at Buzzard Gap. The hard look had left his smoky-gray eyes. He would spend the next few days visiting with his mother, working around the garden, helping to repair the smoke damage caused by the incendiary fire.

The sheriff cocked his head sidewise. A rider was pounding along the road from the direction of Rangerville. The hoofbeats of his horse came with increasing thump and increasing tempo. Pete lifted a quizzical eyebrow.

The horseman galloped around the turn. And then he was beside Pete, reining up sharply.

Pete stared. The rider was Sam Hollis, owner of the feed store in Buzzard Gap.

For just an instant, Pete's heart seemed to drop. He had a hunch that something had happened to his mother. Had the smoke seriously affected one of her age?

"What's up, Sam?" he asked sharply. "Somethin' about my mother? Give it to me—quick! Don't beat around the bush, pard!"

"Oh, maybe it ain't enough to get excited about," Sam answered. "Nothin' about your mother—I'm glad to say. Mrs. Rice is feelin' fine. But there's some right odd doin's in Grama Valley that Coroner Buckley reckoned might need lookin' into. He said to come pronto."

However, any man can be wrong. And Sam Hollis was wrong this time. For it *was* "enough to get excited about."

It was a matter that was to change the name of peaceful Grama Valley, northwest of Buzzard Gap, to "Dead Men's Valley." And this coming case was to keep Pistol Pete Rice and his fearless deputies on the move for days—fighting for the law they had sworn to uphold, dodging bullets, seeing that outlaws did not dodge them, matching their iron wills and agile brains and blistering fists and belching guns against tricky, ruthless forces.

Pistol Pete Rice was long to remember Grama Valley—or Dead Men's Valley, as it was to be re-baptized in fire and blood.

Dead Men's Valley!

Sinisterly but appropriately named!

THE END

Hiram Walker & Sons

BLACK HAWK WHISKEY

THE name of Hiram Walker & Sons—for 75 years famous for quality—guarantees the purity and value of Black Hawk. The base of this excellent blend is straight 4-year-old whiskey—smooth, mellow and fine-flavored. Try Black Hawk just once. Its price is reasonable, and your first purchase will introduce to you a whiskey which you will want to make a favorite.

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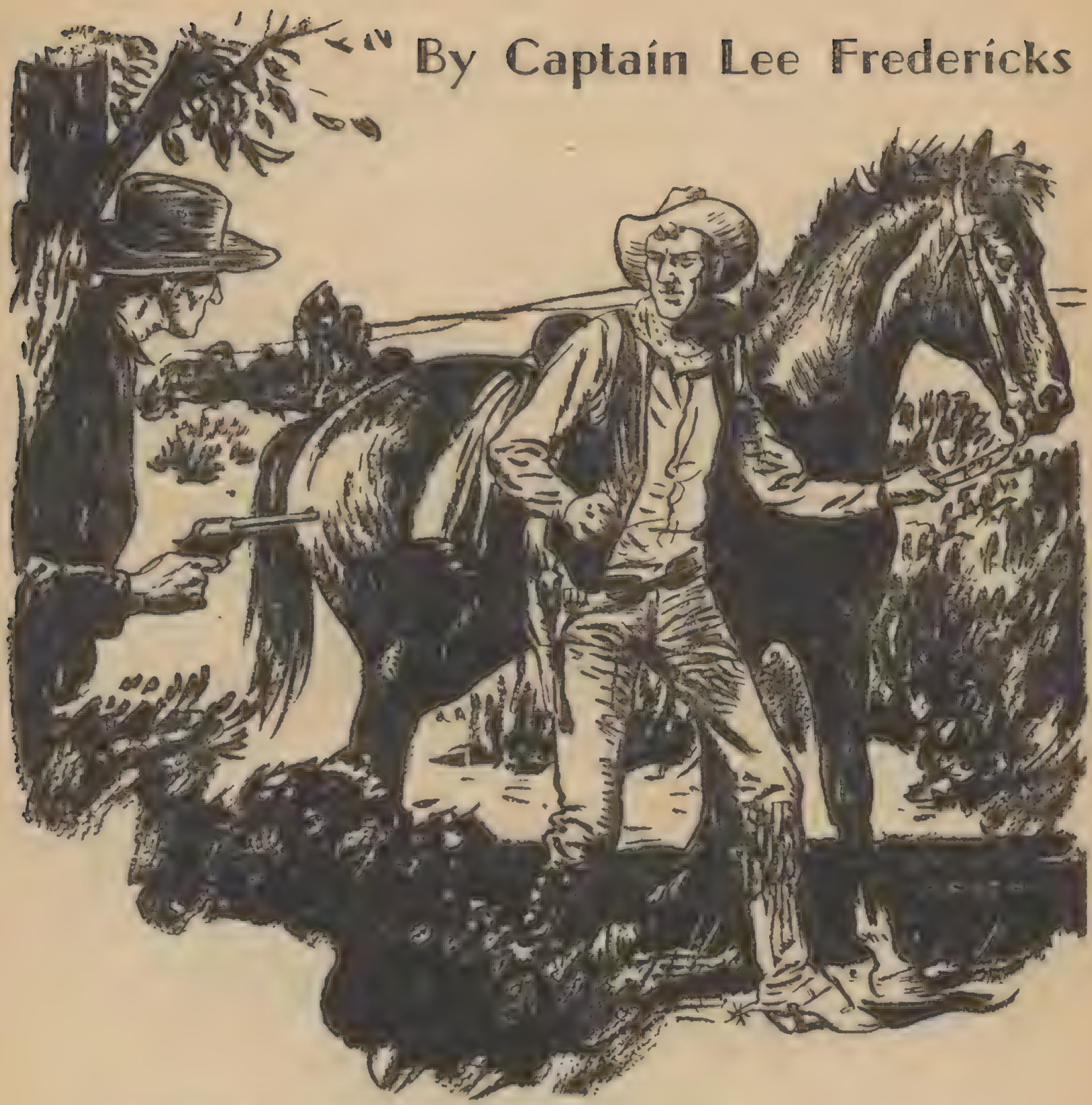
By Captain Lee Fredericks



A murderer receives his punishment, even though he lived by

Lead Commandments

JIM SHERMAN looked up from his branding irons and regarded the oncoming horse curiously. "Ridin' hell bent for leather," he observed. "Wonder what's on his mind?"

As the rider thundered up he saw that the horse was covered with lather, as though it had been ridden at break-neck speed for a long distance. His friend, Charlie Endean was the rider.

Sherman methodically put the irons in the fire and loosed the struggling calf.

"Kinda hard on horseflesh, ain't'cha?" he queried, as the other brought his paint pony to a sliding stop.

"Git yore horse and ride outa here!" Endean shouted without dismounting. "They're comin' to git yuh."

Sherman's eyes opened wide in surprise. "Who's comin' to git who?" he asked wonderingly.

"The posse, yuh ijit!" Endean yelled excitedly. "Slim Everest seen yuh do it."

If it was possible, Sherman's eyes opened wider. "Don't yuh reckon the heat——"

"Don't reckon the heat had anything to do with yore murderin' old Dad Ryan last night an' cleanin' the express station over in Leadville. Ef I didn't know yuh better, I woulda let 'em come out an' string yuh up like yuh deserve."

Sherman's mouth shut like a steel trap. "I reckon it might be a good idee ef you'd git down offn that horse an' explain yoreself," he said ominously. "Sounds like thar's sompthin' there smells mighty like skunk. What was that name I heerd yuh mention—Everest?"

"Yeah, Everest. He tells the sheriff thet he heerd the shootin' an' come runnin' outa his shack jest in time to see yuh git on yore horse an' ride outa town like a prairie fire. He sez thet he took a pot shot at yuh but missed. Then he run over to wake the sheriff—so I lit out to warn yuh thet they was a-comin'."

"Everest told them that?"

"From what I heerd."

Sherman's mouth set in a grim line. He strode over to where his horse was hobbled. "I've knowed that Everest had it in fur me since I stopped my boys from playin' with him at his Last Chance Saloon. I guessed he run a crooked game an' told him as much." He grasped his bridle.

"Where d'yuh intend headin'?" Endean asked curiously.

"To git Everest," Sherman answered shortly.

He swung into the saddle and was gone before his friend could protest.

An hour later found Sherman mounting the trail for Leadville. He wanted to get there after nightfall. He had some suspicions of his own that he must investigate before he could afford to be picked up by the posse.

So "Slim" Everest had accused him of murder, had he? Sherman's brow wrinkled in thought. There had never been much good blood between the gambler and Jim Sherman.

The cowman suspected Everest of crooked dealing with the cards and had openly warned him after he had discovered that his waddies lost consistently whenever they held forth opposite Slim at the Last Chance. The gambler's beady, shifty eyes, his glib tongue and nervous facile hands ought to have been signal enough to the players at the saloon.

Sherman slowed his horse to a comfortable walk while he considered the accusation in the light of what he suspected. There had been a number of station robberies around Leadville lately. If one was hung on him, the rest would be, and he knew that feeling in Leadville would run high.

"Dad" Ryan was highly thought of by the town. His death was sure to mean a necktie party for some one, and Sherman's mission was to see that the some one wasn't him.

Suddenly he stooped over the neck of his horse, pulled up and peered intently at the ground. In the soft red clay were hoofprints. Some one had been along the trail a few hours ahead of him. It had rained early that morning and the prints were new.

Sherman climbed from his horse and followed them. They went along the trail until it reached a small gully lined with bushes. Cautiously, Sherman looked around for horse or rider. No one was in sight. He parted the bushes and led his mount off the trail.

"Stick 'em up!"

Sherman whirled at the sound of the command and found himself gazing down the muzzle of a vicious-looking

six-shooter. He had no chance to draw. He elevated his hands.

Still keeping his gun on Sherman, the man stepped out of the bushes.

With a start of recognition, Jim saw that it was Slim Everest, the Leadville gambler who had laid the murder onto him.

"Long way from home, ain't'cha?" Sherman queried mildly.

While he talked his eyes roved over the figure before him. He would wait until the gambler came a little closer and—— Everest arrived within striking distance. Instinctively Sherman let fly with his heavy boot and fist at the same time.

The unsuspecting card sharp let out a grunt of surprise and consternation as Jim's fist hit him in the stomach and his foot connected with his shins. The combined force of the two blows doubled him up like a jackknife.

Sherman took full advantage of the other's surprise. Before Slim could recover, he threw his full weight at the man. Together they toppled to the ground.

The slim gambler was no match for Sherman's strong shoulders and powerful right jab. He knew he was licked and allowed himself to be disarmed.

Jim yanked the sullen man to his feet, then kept his .45 trained on him while he got his rawhide from his saddle horn.

"I said you might be a long way from home," Sherman repeated tersely, as he tied the man up in a fashion that made it certain he wouldn't break away.

"I might say the same of you," Slim sneered at his complacent captor.

"Yeah, so yuh might," Slim agreed. "But I'm on my way to Leadville to see 'bout some business. Don't remember hearin' that yuh planned to leave town with business so good."

"Reckon yuh know yore wanted by the law," Slim grated.

"That's the reason we're goin' to town," Sherman calmly informed him.

At that remark all the defiance melted out of the slim gambler. "Lookit here," he whined placatingly. "Mebbe I made a mistake 'bout tryin' to hold yuh fur the law."

"Mebbe yuh made a worse mistake when yuh thought yuh saw me come out of the express station last night," Sherman said. "Reckon we better git our heads together an' find out how come yuh made that mistake."

"Well, I'm warnin' yuh," Slim's face was panic-stricken. "The posse'll string yuh up soon's they lay hands on yuh! Now, we can get out o' here and travel together——"

Jim's direct gray eyes hardened to twin points of flashing steel at the other's proposal.

"I'd jest as soon travel with a rattlesnake," he observed coldly. "What's the matter? Scared?"

His captive opened his mouth to speak, thought better of it, closed it and satisfied his spleen by glaring at Sherman as he finished his thorough job of tying him up.

"Where's yore horse?" Sherman queried.

The gambler nodded his head in the direction from which he had made his appearance.

"Well, step on it! Git goin'!" Jim commanded, shoving him toward his horse. He threw the gambler onto his mount and then fastened his feet securely together under the horse's belly. He surveyed his work and gave a pleased grunt.

"Reckon yore fixed for a while," he added. "We got a long ride ahead."

The fear in Slim's eyes grew active. "Where yuh figgar on takin' me," he asked nervously.

"Leadville," Sherman answered shortly.

Then, before the other could protest and seeming not to notice the livid desperation in his eyes, Jim mounted his own horse and, leading Slim's, climbed the steep incline that led back to the trail.

For some time they followed the main trail along toward Leadville. When they came to a cut-off, Sherman wheeled both horses abruptly into it.

The new trail was bad, but he would have to get to Leadville now as fast as horseflesh would carry him and his prisoner. What an hour ago had been an idea, was now turning into a definite suspicion as he mulled over past events.

Slim appeared mighty anxious not to go back to Leadville—that was obvious to Sherman. He also didn't seem anxious to have Jim appear back there on the scene. The more he thought of it the more the idea stuck in Jim's mind that the gambler must be afraid that he could find something back in Leadville which would incriminate him or connect him in some way with the murder.

The best course for him, Jim decided, would be to get back to the scene of the crime without the posse apprehending him, and go over the ground with the gambler.

Several times Slim tried to speak to him. Sherman silenced him by the simple expedient of not answering him.

They were on open range and the country was poor. Jim had all he could do to keep his eyes peeled on the slippery gumbo beneath. He had to keep horses and riders from losing balance and falling into the slimy stuff. He knew the danger of a sudden slide and a broken leg. Too often he had seen it happen at round-ups.

The sound of approaching hoofbeats reached his ears. He cautioned his prisoner to keep quiet; then, ducking low to be out of sight, he pulled his horse over and rode up one of the innumerable small gullies that broke up bad rangeland.

Sherman knew from the sound that there were too many horsemen to be out on a spree or on business. It was a posse—and they were out looking for him.

His prisoner's eyes lighted with hope at the sound of the thundering hooves. He was saving his breath until the pursuers would approach close enough for him to be heard.

Something of his intention must have been apparent, for Sherman whipped out his .45 and trained it on him.

"One sound outa yuh," he grated, "an' yore a dead man!"

Slim looked him over, terror in his eyes. Sherman's calloused fingers were set on the trigger in a way Slim knew meant business. He opened his mouth to protest innocence of intention to give warning, then closed it again. He gathered from the look in those cold gray eyes behind the gun, that a hair's breadth of the wrongly chosen word stood between him and sudden death.

Suddenly Slim's horse went down. Sherman was off his mount in a flash and to the aid of the fallen animal.

The beast looked at him piteously. Jim could see that its leg was broken, but he couldn't risk a shot to put it out of its misery—not with the posse so close at hand.

Quickly he unbound Slim's feet and lifted him out of the sticky gumbo. The hoofbeats were coming closer every second, and from now on he would have to ride double. It seemed to Sherman that all of the troubles in the world were pouring down on his head at once.

"Up on my horse, you!" he commanded.

The slender gambler obeyed without a word, but the look on his face was one of unholy glee. If the posse had trackers, they would be sure to notice

where his and Sherman's trail split off from the main one.

Sherman realized this, too.

At the other end of the gully the two men were in, was an old deserted miner's cabin. It had originally belonged to a recluse named Parker, a man with peculiar ideas. He had run his mine shaft directly from the back of his cabin, always afraid that some one would enter his mine while he slept, and steal his gold.

There was only one thing for Sherman to do—try for the cabin. If he could once gain it, the chances of his holding out against the posse would be infinitely better. He had to bank everything on reaching Leadville a free man, so that he could conduct his investigations unhampered. It was the only way he could hope to prove his innocence.

The horses of the posse were almost atop the place where he and Slim had left the trail. Sherman heard them rein up suddenly. They had discovered the split in the trails.

He quickly mounted his horse in back of the bound Slim and spurred the animal on in the direction of Parker's cabin.

Behind him, Sherman could hear the group sweep off the main trail onto the cut-off. Another mile stood between him and the cabin. Throwing caution to the winds, he spurred the heavily burdened horse to greater efforts.

Somewhere behind, the posse hesitated—stopped. They must have come across the crippled horse. A shot rang out—a momentary silence, then again the jangling of riders' equipment.

Sherman was in sight of the old miner's cabin, deserted since Parker had followed the blind vein as far into the hill as it went. He heaved a sigh of relief. Once in the cabin he could put up a good battle.

He had spent many nights there, when roaming the country. If the worst came to the worst, he could make a run for it and try to escape through the old mine workings. He dug his spurs in again.

Almost at the door of the cabin he was hailed by a shout from behind. A hoarse voice commanded him to stop in the name of the law. Sherman swung down from his horse and, dragging his prisoner with him, ducked through the half-open doorway.

Not a second too soon. Before he could close the heavy door, bullets were whining and thudding about the building.

Slim's face was ashen with fear as the hot lead poured through the space that had once held a window, hit the wall with a sickening thud and ricocheted back through the one room of the cabin.

Sherman placed his hat on a stick and poked it up to the window ledge. A veritable sheet of lead descended on the target. While the men outside concentrated on the hat, Jim cautiously peeked out the door.

At least seventy men were out there. He looked a second time to make sure his eyes weren't exaggerating. There were enough men to hold out until he starved or died from thirst.

Sherman could see no use in staying where he was. He turned to the helpless Slim. He picked the man up bodily and placed him against the wall.

As he moved the gambler, a deck of cards fell out of Slim's pocket, along with a case that held eyeglasses. Sherman picked them up and turned the cards over curiously. The cards seemed all right; he was about to return them to Everest. Then, suddenly seized with a notion, he took out the glasses and adjusted them on the bridge of his nose.

The glasses were the same shade of blue as the designs on the backs of the cards. Sherman looked at the cards

through the blue glasses and the design blended into the color of the glass until it was almost indistinguishable.

It was then that Jim saw how Slim Everest always managed to win. Tiny dots of another color, which to the naked eye appeared part of the design, showed plainly through the glasses, denoting the denomination and suit of each card.

SHERMAN took off the glasses and turned to the cringing gambler. "Now I understand why yuh always wore dark glasses at the table!" he said threateningly. "They fade out the design and these here dots stick out like sore thumbs. Yore jest what I thought —a crook!"

One by one he turned the cards over and examined them, made a move to confiscate them, then, thinking better of it, shoved them back into the livid gambler's pocket. He paused to fire a fusillade out the door to discourage immediate attack by the sheriff and his posse. Then, he pulled at the boards in the rear of the shack.

They gave easily, and revealed an opening that led to the lateral mine shaft out directly back into the hillside.

Sherman gave a parting glance at the crooked gambler.

"I'm stayin' hid right behind these boards," he lied cheerfully. "An' ef yuh so much as let one peep outa yuh when I duck, I'm lettin' daylight right through yuh!"

Slim didn't answer, but his face told volumes as he stared, fascinated, into the barrel of the six-shooter which Sherman had leveled at him.

"No guts," Jim muttered to himself.

After a final burst of fire out the cabin door, he disappeared through the opening and worked his way back along the mine shaft.

Somewhere toward the end of the shaft he knew there was another opening out into the hillside. Old man Parker had a fear of the tunnel caving in on him some day and had built this other shaft. Sherman meant to use this to effect his escape—if he could only locate it.

THE mine workings were more extensive than Sherman had at first thought. Several times he was forced to retrace his steps when he found himself wandering up blind drifts to a blank end. Being a waddy and used to the open range, he had a feeling akin to panic when he met with blind drifts on every side.

But with dogged determination born of fearless courage, he searched on.

At times he thought he heard the voices of his pursuers, and crouched against the wall waiting for them to pass. The men were evidently in the cabin, and echoes of their conversation drifted to him. He would have to find his way out soon or be trapped in the underground workings. The tunnel played queer tricks in amplifying the voices of the posse.

Sherman heard a muttered curse from behind him in the dark.

"This hole's too black, sheriff. What say we wait fur him outside?"

Jim's heart leaped when he heard the voice. It was a man he knew. Then he realized that the man thought him a murderer. He couldn't call out to him or talk to him until he cleared himself of the murder in Leadville.

Making as little noise as possible, Jim stumbled through the darkness, hunting for the exit he knew must be somewhere near.

The noise but not the words of the sheriff's answer reached him, then his pursuers' steps retreated toward the cabin. Jim hoped fervently that they wouldn't search the outside and find the other shaft before he managed to get out of the place.

A spot of light appeared in the tunnel. Jim looked up. It wasn't the shaft

which he sought, but a cave-in. Dirt and loose rocks were piled almost to the top. The way up would be a precarious one. Sherman couldn't tell whether the pile would hold him without causing a second cave-in, but he would have to chance it.

Slowly he climbed, feeling bits of rocks and pebbles slide from under his feet and trying to dislodge as few as possible.

The noise attracted the attention of the men inside the cabin. Their exclamations resounded in the tunnel as they came hurrying along it at a run.

Frantically, without regard for the falling rocks, Jim climbed the rest of the distance. He clutched at the top. It crumbled under his weight. He pulled himself up desperately—then, as he rolled over the edge, he felt it give under him.

AUTOMATICALLY he knew that the ground was caving in beneath him and that the aged timbers below weren't strong enough to hold the extra weight of another landslide.

The men below had no premonition of their danger. Many of them he had palled with before he was branded as a murderer. Forgetting his own safety on the verge of a victorious escape, he flung himself back into the pit.

A falling rock grazed his head, partially dazed him. There was still a chance for him to escape—but at the cost of the other men's lives. He would feel himself a murderer then.

As he thought of the men pressing up into the passage, he hurled his body straight down the shaft. At the bottom he landed almost on the sheriff's men.

"Back!" he shouted. "She's a-comin' in!"

The men didn't stop to argue. They knew the dangers of a mine cave-in too well. Shouting warnings to all who were crowding into the shaft, they dashed back toward the cabin.

The first of the timbers started to creak under the load of earth pressing down on it. Dirt sifted from the cracks in the straining timbers. Back at the place they had just left, they heard the reverberating boom of a timber as it snapped. And as if this were the signal, the old mine timbers began to break with the sound of giant cannon crackers. The men pushed wild eyed in the attempt to all get into the cabin at once.

Sherman was the last in the shaft. He sensed the timbers cracking over his head. He ducked madly to escape a falling beam, only to be caught at the knees by another. He stumbled, and would have fallen but for the support of the bulging side walls.

Parker's mine was closing up for good and all, and to Sherman it looked as though it would be his tomb.

The débris stopped falling from overhead. The closing walls were forming an arch. Jim staggered on, trying to keep on his feet when he struck projecting mine timbers. He coughed, strangling from the dust as thick as fog.

Then, half blinded, he sprawled into the cabin, directly into the arms of the waiting sheriff.

Behind him the earth roared sullenly as it settled into place. He hadn't escaped a second too soon. In his daze he dimly heard the sheriff formally place him under arest. Then he collapsed, bleeding from wounds in a dozen places.

SHERMAN awoke with a peculiar buzzing in his ears. His body seemed to be on a small boat at sea—a boat that was rocking to a gentle ocean swell. The buzzing left, but the rocking continued. Slowly he opened his eyes.

He was swinging in a tarpaulin that was hung between two horses, a sort of improvised litter. He tried to sit up.

The pain in his head was terrific. He groaned.

Some one leaned over him. "Are yuh feelin' better?" a voice asked.

Again Jim tried to sit up. This time he had more success. Swaying dizzily, he clutched at the horse's neck and drew himself erect.

"Did everybody get out?" he asked weakly.

"Yep, thanks," the same voice answered cheerily. Sherman saw who it was—Bill Todd, sheriff of Leadville.

"Listen, Bill," he said earnestly. "I didn't do it."

"Reckon as how I believe yuh," the sheriff answered. "But the law's the law and my duty is—well——" he shrugged.

"Say, sheriff," Jim called weakly. "Is —is Slim along?"

"You bet!" the sheriff replied emphatically. "Need 'im as material witness, though he didn't seem too pleased to come. He's the man that claims he seen yuh shoot up the station."

"I got an idee." Sherman signaled the sheriff to come closer, and whispered in his ear.

"Sounds good," he commented. "But what ef it don't work?"

Sherman made a motion across his throat. "Reckon I might be in a tight spot."

The sheriff nodded gloomily, and Sherman, feeling the loss of blood, flopped back in his litter and went fast asleep.

It was close to two a. m. when the posse finally arrived back in Leadville.

Sherman was considerably refreshed by the cat nap he had snatched on the way into town. He was able to walk unassisted into the tiny two-cell jail. Directly in back of him was Slim, the crooked gambler.

"Don't reckon you'd put me in a cell with that rattler," Sherman said, pointing disgustedly at the gambler he didn't like.

"Nope," the sheriff agreed. "Don't reckon that would be healthy fur the State's star witness against yuh."

"Listen, Bill," Sherman made an earnest request. "Couldn't I see the scene of the crime afore they put me away to-night?"

The sheriff looked at him queerly. "There ain't nothin' in the statutes of the State thet says yuh can't."

"Has anything been disturbed?"

The sheriff shook his head. "Waal, the body's been removed, o' course. But everything else has been left jest as it was fur the insurance man to arrive an' fix things up fur the express company."

"Well, do I go?"

"Reckon so," the sheriff assented grudgingly. He called three deputies aside. "We're takin' the prisoner over to inspect the scene of the crime," he said. "Keep a close eye on 'im an'——"

"Wait a minute," Slim cut in. "Effn yuh let this hombre go, waal," he finished lamely, "I don't see why I can't go 'long, too."

The sheriff looked at Sherman.

The accused waddy gave him a slow wink. "Don't see as how 'twould do any harm, sheriff," he said.

Together the six men filed down to the express company's office. The building was in darkness when they arrived. The guard passed the sheriff and his party in. One of the deputies lighted a lamp and the men walked into the office.

The place was a shambles. Evidently there had been a good battle before the clerk was killed. Bullet scars dotted the walls in several places.

Sherman strode quickly to one of the walls and dug out one of the pieces of lead. It was completely flattened out.

"Don't guess yuh could judge the caliber from that," he admitted grudgingly. "Let's see ef there's anythin'

else here that might give us a clue."

For several minutes he roamed the floor, looking around the tables and the one desk that the office contained. Suddenly, with a muttered exclamation, he stooped and brought up a playing card from the floor.

"Mebbe this might tell us somp-thin'," he said, showing it to the sheriff. As the sheriff reached for it, Sherman's eyes glinted.

"Wait a minute, sheriff." He drew the card back. "I want to see that card." Slowly he turned it over. It was the ten of hearts.

He looked at Slim Everest. The man's face had turned a greenish-gray. "Might have the right man here, sheriff," Sherman said slowly and deliberately. "This card's crooked. Ef yuh go through that man's pockets," he pointed to the slim card sharp, "I reckon yuh might find the rest o' the deck!"

Everest jumped for the door.

The two deputies and the sheriff seized him as soon as he made the move. The sheriff went into his pockets. With a grunt of satisfaction, he brought out the deck of cards. The two deputies held Slim while he counted them.

"Yep," only fifty-one," he observed. He turned to the flinching gambler. "You must o' left yore calling card. Mebbe yuh would like tuh make a confession?" he questioned.

"That man's a liar!" Everest shouted. "He must o' planted the deck in my pocket!"

"Mebbeso, mebbeso," was the sheriff's reply. "We'll have to let the jury decide thet. Right now I place yuh under arrest fur the murder of old Dad Ryan, the station agent."

Slim glared into Jim's smiling face. "Damn yuh!" he grated. "I knowed yuh was a snooper! Yuh caused me to lose out in the saloon through yore damn snoopin' methods! It's you that made me go to robbin' stations. Yore men came in an' cleaned me out with their own crooked cards. I had to git money fast, so I figgared to hang it onto you."

"Simple, eh, sheriff?" Jim turned triumphantly to Bill.

Slim slumped in the deputies' hands —then, with a wild heave, wrenched himself free from his guards, snatching one of their guns from its holster.

The men were too dumfounded to take action as the slim gambler aimed and fired. A split-second before the thundering explosion, Sherman ducked. Slim hadn't recovered from his first shot when Jim had him by the knees. They hit the floor with a vibrating thud.

Sherman's hand reached for the gun. The sheriff and his men stood by, unable to come to his aid for fear of wounding the wrong man in the mêlée. Jim felt the gambler's thumb gouging into his eye. The pain was terrific.

With a desperate heave he flung himself from the clutching fingers, saw the other's hand come up with the gun—strained for it.

A muffled explosion—the thin crook jerked convulsively.

Sherman rose to his feet, gun in hand.

"Waal, sheriff, yuh have a real one to pin on me now," he observed.

"That might be called self-defense," the sheriff answered dryly.

Slim Everest's eyes fluttered. He tried to sit up, and finding the effort too much, lay back on the floor and weakly motioned to the sheriff.

"Yep, I killed Ryan," he said. "He came in the office and caught me when I was a-tryin' to open the safe. He pulled a gun on me, so I let him have it. I—I don't—understand how I come to leave that card. I thought—I had—'em all."

"Yuh didn't leave it," the sheriff told him. "Sherman palmed it when he had yuh in the shack. He figured mebbe

ef he planted that card on the floor, yuh might talk."

"Reckon I knowed yuh was guilty when yuh didn't want to come back to Leadville," Sherman put in.

Slim sat up straight and pointed at Sherman. "I'll git yuh fur this, yuh ——" He fell back on the floor, dead.

Sherman looked silently at the body for a moment; then: "Waal, I don't know," he said, "but them that lives by lead commandments, generally dies the same way."

The sheriff nodded solemn agreement.

USE OF TOBACCO AMONG PUEBLO INDIANS

ALTHOUGH the use of tobacco among Indians has been associated with the "peace-pipe," this is not true of the Indians of the Southwest. For among the Pueblos the peace-pipe was not known, a form of cigarette being used in its stead.

It has been proven that the Indians of the Southwest used tobacco before the coming of the Spaniards, but in the form of a weed the origin of which has never been discovered nor its type identified.

Until the coming of the white man the Pueblos used the *weer*, a reedy tube filled with their form of tobacco. But with the arrival of the white man, the Indian turned to tobacco wrapped with cornhusk or a special form of brown paper.

Tobacco is used so much among the Pueblos and other Indians of the Southwest in their religious ceremonies that it is nearly impossible to tell when one is smoking for pleasure or to ward off evil spirits. And so subtle is the Indian in his smoking that he may have offered up prayers to his god when the watcher thought he was merely enjoying a good smoke—for the first six puffs go in different directions as a means of warding off the evil spirits.

A Pueblo would never think of smoking a cigarette in front of his father even though he be a man with family and children and his father an old man. It is just not done. And when an Indian boy smokes his first cigarette—usually not before reaching manhood—it is a sign of his majority, just as in the olden times the winning of his first scalp proclaimed him a man.

The smoking of cigarettes by medicine men has much bearing on the weather—according to the Pueblos—and in times of drouth the medicine men shut themselves in the ceremonial hall and for a period of from four to eight days smoke continuously the sacred *weer*, eating nothing and drinking only water.

If one Pueblo accepts tobacco and cornhusk from another, it is a sign of friendship, and neither can fight the other; and when an Indian dies, the medicine men blow smoke around his bier, so that evil spirits cannot follow him to the happy hunting ground.

CATTLE BRANDING

WHEN the branding of cattle is mentioned, the average American immediately pictures in his mind the West of fifty years ago, with bucking broncos, picturesque cowboys, immense stretches of open grazing land—and rustlers. In his mind, the branding of cattle served no other purpose than to be a periodic check-up on the ownership of cattle, and to battle with thieves who sought to gain illegally what belonged to others.

Not many of us will readily believe that to-day cattle branding is practiced as much as it ever was; that it is still being done for the protection of private property, as was the original purpose of this method of marks—and that rustlers to-day are as much of a problem for the rancher as they were in the good old days, if not more so.

There is a difference between the ranches of to-day and the ranches of yesterday—or at least, the ranches of yesterday that present-day stories portray to us. While the West was still wide open, while land was still at no premium, a rancher's holdings might extend beyond even his own exact knowledge. The plains were "open" to his cattle as far as they might wish to graze, limited only by the restraining work of his hired help. He had little need to worry about trespassing upon his neighbor's property, nor had he much danger of getting his own stock mixed with that of any other rancher.

However, in order to avoid such possibility, each owner had his own particular brand or mark, which he stamped upon every piece of his cattle. This brand was his trade-mark and his signature. It was the pride of every worker on the ranch, and its meaning was woven into song and story told about the camp fire. Many of the brands were unique in appearance; all of them were attractive, and some very euphonious in sound.

But, as usual, evil minds will find a way to circumvent honest effort, and succeed temporarily. The idea of having cattle out in the open, where any one might seize them, with nothing but a brand to signify ownership, was seized upon by the cattle crook or rustler. He would arrange his crime neatly, and either by stealth or by force, would capture a quantity of cattle, substitute his own brand, and be considered the owner. In every case, of course, his own brand was one that could be superimposed upon the previous branding so effectively that it appeared to be one job.

Many times he got away with it, for the owner of the ranch could not be counting his stock constantly, and by the time the loss was noticed, the rustler had already disposed of his stock. Besides, by quietly leading the cattle away through trick canyons or into hidden places, the rustler was taking very little chance of immediate discovery.

That was the story many years ago. To-day, almost similar conditions prevail—except that they favor the crooked rancher, if any one. The open ranch is gone—property has been so subdivided that the average ranch to-day is well bound and

fenced in. This prevents cattle from straying, and definitely establishes ownership. But it is not sufficient to do away with the brand, for to-day that is even more essential than before.

The cattle rustler to-day drives up a fast truck to the fenced-in ranch. He cuts the fencing, rushes a truckload of cattle into his vehicle—and is probably several hundred miles away by the time the theft is discovered, the following morning. He has speedier means of escape than ever before; he has more opportunity of concealment; he has a greater crooked organization to work for.

What good, then, is the simple method of branding one's property, if it can be taken so easily?

Of course, in resale, one might recognize the brand and realize that the cattle might be stolen. The modern rustler, however, doesn't care to take such a chance. He finds it much better to kill his steers, destroy the hide—or at least the part which bears the brand—and sell the meat through equally illegal channels.

He might, too, of course, use the old method of blotting out the original brand and substituting his own. In this scheme, all of modern scientific knowledge and ingenuity has been sought by rustlers, and put in effect. Fortunately, the law has invariably discovered these alterations, for no matter how smart the crook is, the law finds ways of outwitting him.

The entire organization of modern ranchers, especially in regard to the protection of their property, is based upon the use of the old-fashioned brand. The blacksmith who makes the manufacture of branding irons his profession is far from an extinct creature in to-day's West. He is busy making these irons for possibly a hundred thousand different ranch owners, each marking their stock in their own distinctive way. And right behind the blacksmith and his work is an organization of ranch owners, with the support and direction of State authorities, which takes every possible precaution to protect the rancher.

Every brand mark is registered in the State in which the ranch is located. This registration is done with as much care and legal form as is the deeding of property, for each brand is the property of the individual who is using it, and cannot be used or imitated by any other. The brands are passed on and administered just as is any other form of property. Immediately after registration of a brand, it becomes part of the estate of the owner, and remains such until a legal transaction is made otherwise.

It is hardly possible, of course, with the tremendous number of brands in use, to make each one entirely different. Many of the brands lend themselves to easy duplication or alteration into some other brand. Realizing this danger, a protective organization, nationwide, has been set up.

Every important cattle market has its quota of "inspectors" who have as their special duty the checking of all sales made in this market, making sure that every purchase and sale is honestly made, and that the cattle delivered are as described. The least sign makes them suspicious, and sale on such suspected stock is stopped.

These inspectors check every head of cattle going through sale. If there is something unseemly or suspicious about the stock, the inspector notifies the buyer, who withholds the proceeds of the sale until proper steps are taken to establish identity of the stock.

The job of the inspector becomes rather complex when you consider that many sales are of mixed brands. However, in such case, a bill of sale from the

original owner to the present seller must be shown, thus giving the buyer clear title to his property. If the bill of sale cannot be shown, or equally conclusive evidence given, the sale is not made, and *branded stock goes back to the original owner whose brand appears on the cattle!* This is a hard and fast rule, and the "teeth" in the stockmen's business to-day.

Some of the inspectors have been in service for many years, and their memories have so developed that they can instantly name the owner of any particular brand. This means that thousands of names must be at their finger tips—and it means that a rustler who tries to get rustled stock through hasn't a chance at all. He must resort to falsified records, or else follow the previously mentioned method of killing his stolen goods, and trafficking in the meat. There is not as much profit in this as there would be in a direct sale of the stock.

Further branding provisions are that each owner must specify the exact part of the animal on which the brand is to be placed. Shoulder, ribs or hips are the accustomed spots—either on the left or right side.

The brand must be at least six inches high—large enough to be visible. The application of the brand is made with an iron, wrought into the design of the brand, and heated cherry-red. In applying the iron, the hair is burnt off, and the hide blistered sufficiently that it peels when healed.

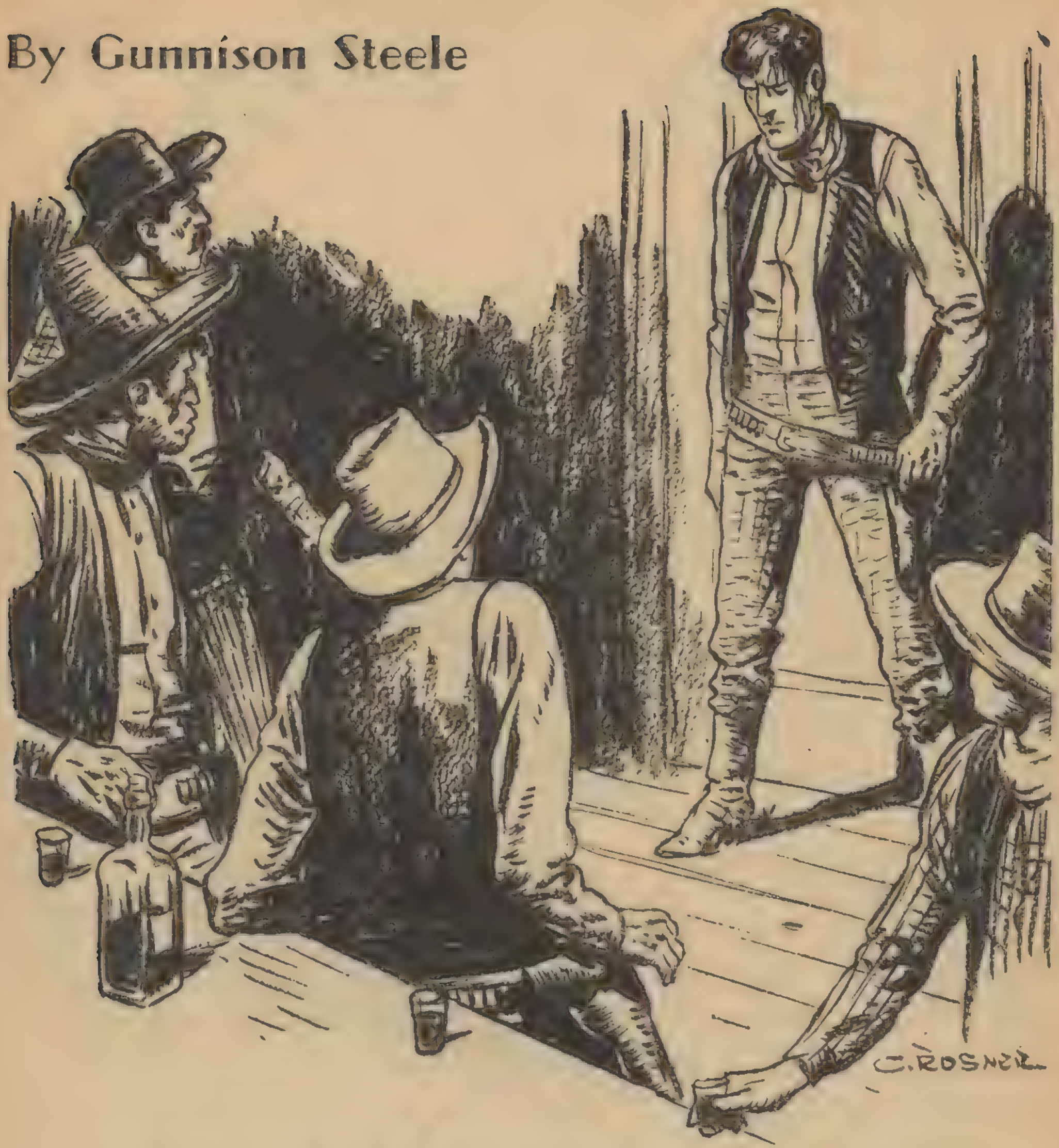
Harry R. Swanson, Secretary of the State of Nebraska, has performed an unusual service in having combined all of the registered brands in his State into bound form, and made the publication available to all. The exact reproduction, together with names of owners, is like a business blue-book—only it is one of the oldest businesses in our country, and one that is still thriving, despite common opinion to the contrary. In Nebraska alone, over two hundred thousand calves were branded this year. This number has been increased by the amount in neighboring States until about a million and a half of new calves were thus registered. And for each one of these branded calves, a steer or cow has been sent the way to the great cattle markets—Kansas City, St. Joseph. Denver, Sioux City, Chicago, or some of the others. Over a million and a half pieces of "live" goods, each one checked for proper ownership, using as a basis the old-fashioned branding iron trade-mark!

In the words of Mr. Swanson:

"Every spring and fall, even in these days, the prairies of Nebraska, Wyoming, Montana and other States bring back reminders of the days when the West was wild and woolly. . . . Yes, in those days cowboys did celebrate after the fall round-up by hoisting a few and becoming hilarious. . . . They still celebrate, but in a different way. They bathe, they shave, don store clothes and oxfords, step on the gas and rush off to dance, to the music of fine orchestras, with girls whose gowns would compare favorably with those of girls in the fashionable Eastern circles. . . ."

So, indeed, the cowboy of old has not vanished entirely. He has changed his play-time, perhaps. He has changed some of his system, some of his thinking. But the greatest part of his job, guarding and raising cattle, seems to remain very much as it has been from the very start. There seems to be just one way of making a ranch successful—raising cattle, and doing it effectively.

By Gunnison Steele



In the midst of a whirling sandstorm the Thief River Kid comes home to claim his own

SAND

IT was a howling sand blizzard that blew young "Buck" Kallan into the border town of Lucifer Flats. Coated by a layer of dust that clung to his lean form like a gray shroud, he eyed shrewdly the ugly, sun-blasted shacks on each side of him as he rode slowly along the street.

A moaning wall of wind-driven sand, the dry storm had swept suddenly across the plain an hour before, catching Buck Kallan in an unprotected section of the country and still five miles from his objective—Lucifer Flats.

Almost instantly the swirling sand had obscured the sun, and all earthly

objects more than a few yards away, bringing down a weird gray twilight.

Grateful that the storm was at his back, Buck had hunched his lithe body lower in the saddle and pulled his neckerchief higher to protect partially his bronzed, slightly hawkish features from the stinging sand.

Then he had taken the long-barreled six-gun from the holster which was tied low on his left hip, and placed it in his waist-band underneath his shirt as a precaution against the fine-grained sand clogging its mechanism.

For that well-oiled six-gun was the main cog in the plans which he had lived and dreamed during the last few terrible months, plans that would culminate within the next few hours in either success or miserable failure.

Now, as he rode slowly along Lucifer Flats' one narrow street, he knew that here was trail's end.

The wind-driven sand swirled like a steaming fog along the street, tearing at the ramshackle buildings. A number of horses stood with drooping heads at hitch-racks; but not a human was in sight.

About midway the town, before the largest building which Lucifer Flats boasted, Buck dismounted at a rack. Thoughtfully he regarded the sign, sprawled across the false front of the building, which proclaimed it the Howling Dog Saloon.

He took the gun from under his shirt, examined it carefully, slid it into the tied-down holster. Then he went eagerly toward the closed doors of the Howling Dog.

Perhaps, if he could have glimpsed the interior of the Howling Dog, he would have sought another of the numerous drinking places to satisfy his thirst. And perhaps not——

The big barroom was crowded with men, prisoners of the sand, men who milled restlessly and growled angrily as they drank or gambled.

Honest ranchers and cowboys for the most part, but with a fair sprinkling of rustlers, renegades, murderers, thieves, common border scum—but all with their nerves rubbed raw by the howling wind and stinging sand, the stifling heat and the grit that, despite closed doors and windows, seeped through cracks and settled like a coating of gray paint over everything. They could taste it even in the whiskey they swallowed.

The men, like a pack of cloistered dogs, snarled and glared at each other, every man with a chip on his shoulder. A wrong word or movement, and guns were apt to roar sudden death; a single spark, and the explosion would follow!

But in that room was one man who remained aloof from the others, a man whom the others visibly avoided and toward whom no half-veiled insult or challenge was cast. Buckaroo and border killer alike spoke softly when near him, and chose their words carefully.

This man sat alone at a table at the rear of the room, a glass and half-empty whiskey bottle before him. His eyes seldom left the closed door of the saloon, and then only to sweep quick, contemptuous glances about the room.

He was huge, rawboned, with close-cropped yellowish hair and slanting eyes that stared with the direct, evil glare of a snake's orbs. His thick lips writhed back from blackened teeth, lending to his sullen features the appearance of a perpetual sneering grin.

"Chink" Lopez, spawn of an outcast Mexican-Chinese union, was lightning fast with the two six-guns he wore, a man who hired those guns to the highest bidder and killed with the soullessness of a hungry puma. No man had ever been known to face his guns and live, and only the slightest provocation was needed to start them flaming.

Silent and morose, Chink Lopez drank steadily, the sullen restlessness

deepening in his phlegmatic eyes, and every man in the Howling Dog knew that sudden death would probably stalk the room before the storm ended.

The weird blue twilight deepened outside, crept into the room. Harl, the fat bartender, lighted a wheezing kerosene lamp over the bar, another swinging in the center of the room. The drinking and gambling continued.

And Chink Lopez watched sneeringly, sullen eyes returning always to the door——

CHINK was watching the door when it opened suddenly to admit Buck Kallan. A blast of wind and dust roared into the room before some one forced the door closed.

Kallan, blinking in the sudden glare of light, removed his hat from a mass of flaming red hair and slapped some of the clinging dust from his clothes. Deliberately, his hard gray eyes circled the room.

The slant-eyed Chink Lopez saw every one who entered through that doorway. Now his gaze raked the newcomer carelessly, steadied, then probed with a desperate intensity. He saw the lines of bitterness or suffering in the young cowboy's face, noticed the right arm that hung stiff and straight at Buck Kallan's side.

Suddenly, the killer's gaunt body stiffened, the sneering grin became set on his pitted yellow face, an expression of fear or unbelief crept into his wide-staring eyes.

Coolly Buck Kallan's eyes circled the room till they reached the isolated table there in the shadows, and paused. His own expression didn't change—he continued to slap the clinging dust from his clothes; but deliberately, a sudden sneer in their depths, his eyes raked the killer's frame from boots to close-cropped yellow hair.

A sudden shocked silence gripped the room, letting in the hollow booming of the wind and sand. Hands paused with drinks halfway between bar and lips; poker hands became suspended in mid-air; bodies tensed as all eyes focused on either Chink Lopez, crouched there like a horrible tarantula over the table, staring with his slant eyes and horrible sneering grin at the rash young cowpoke who stared insolently back, or at the slim cowboy himself.

Every man in the room sensed stark drama in the scene. More than one felt a stab of pity for the stranger, wondered what was holding Lopez back. Ordinarily, he would already have resented that sneering challenge in the cowboy's cool eyes, would have cursed the other into going for his gun—and would have killed him.

But, apparently, the breed killer hadn't noticed the sneering, unspoken challenge. He sat there, huge, talonlike hands wide spread on the table top, and stared at the newcomer, grinning silently and horribly.

But he didn't rear up with a snarling curse of fury, as he usually did at some fancied insult; he sat there, and something seeped into his eyes, as if his courage had suddenly deserted him but was now returning.

ABRUPTLY, Buck Kallan shrugged, turned and stalked to the bar. There was a sharp clink as he slapped a gold piece against the counter, and a smile curled his young lips as his eyes again circled the room quickly.

"Belly up to the bar, hombres," he called out, "and wet yore gullets! They're on me. I've swallowed so much sand I feel like a mud-pie inside. Belly up, gents!"

Tense bodies relaxed. Boots scraped the floor as a man got to his feet. Somebody laughed, and a general clamor arose as the crowd drifted toward the bar where Buck Kallan waited.

Still the grinning killer Lopez sat hunched over the table—and again si-

lence, save for the tramping of boots, gripped the room. For a man had said the drinks were on him, and over all the West the man who refused to drink had offered to the man buying the drinks a deadly insult.

The poker tables were deserted, and a score of men lined the bar, talking again, but with faces strained.

Buck Kallan's gray eyes flitted over the faces lining the bar. Slowly he turned, and his gaze went to Chink Lopez, sitting alone at his table.

He said nothing, but no man missed the cold contempt in his eyes as they locked with those of the killer. Again deathly silence gripped the room, a silence pregnant with violence and sudden death.

Now, surely, it would come! Now, Chink Lopez would rear up like a grizzly, snarling curses, hands hanging over his death-dealing guns—and among the hell holes of the border would crawl the tale of another brutal killing.

But Lopez didn't rear up. He got to his feet, but he came up slowly, hands on the table top. He pushed back his chair, and his huge Mexican spurs clinked loudly in the silence as he stalked slowly toward the bar.

But, halfway between the table and bar, Buck Kallan's words, lashing out like the crack of a whip, set the border killer back on his heels.

"Go back to yore table, Lopez! My invite didn't include you. I don't buy drinks for polecats!"

A sudden gust of sound swept the room, like a single huge intake of breath. A man slid a few feet aside to get out of line of fire.

Buck Kallan stood slightly away from the bar, and now he wasn't smiling. Feet wide-spread, he stood cold-eyed and tense, left hand hooked in gun belt, right arm stiff at his side.

Chink Lopez stood on the balls of his feet, a half-crouched, an evil lust to kill blazing in his dull eyes, a silent snarl pulling his thick lips.

But once again a murmur of amazement rippled over the room. For the border killer's gaunt body didn't uncoil in a sudden cyclonic holocaust of blazing action, as they had seen it do on other occasions.

Still grinning his horrid grin, Lopez turned slowly and, walking like a big-footed cat, went to a rear door, opened it and went into the darkness that had crept in from the desert.

For several seconds that amazed silence held, while a window rattled harshly under the wind's assault.

When Buck Kallan turned back to the bar, that boyish grin was again on his lips.

"Name yore pizen, gents," he grinned. "Me, I'm knowed as the Thief River Kid in some parts, and that moniker suits me fine. Barkeep, slide me out a bottle o' sody pop!"

Not a man blinked an eye as Buck Kallan ordered soda pop.

"Kid," asked a bearded rancher, "maybe yuh don't savvy what brand that hombre what just left outa here wears?"

"I've met the skunk once before," said the "Thief River Kid" shortly. Then: "Drink 'er down, men, and here's to friendship—'cause I've come to Lucifer Flats to stay!"

Solemnly he downed his soda water, while the others drank hard liquor. After a while, he turned back to the door.

"Now I got to see to my paint hoss. I'll be seein' you gents—later."

"Youngster," said the big rancher after a slight hesitation, "I don't doubt you know yore away about—but if I was you, I'd let one of the boys here bed that nag down. That sand out there's powerful bad!"

"And there might be some bullets floatin' about in that sand, huh?" Buck

Kallan grinned. "Thanks, old-timer, but my hoss don't like for strangers to fool with 'im!"

He turned, strode to the door. A sudden blast of wind and sand roared into the room, only to be choked off abruptly as the door was closed behind the lithe figure of the Thief River Kid.

For a while there was silence in the barroom. Scarcely a man moved from his tracks. Everybody seemed to be listening for something, some sound out there in the storm-lashed night. The wind moaned weirdly and beat relentlessly at the walls. But the men were unconscious of the wind's hollow bellow.

It came suddenly, a single gunshot, but followed almost immediately by a series of popping noises that sounded like firecrackers exploding in a bucket. Then silence again, save for the mocking rumble of wind and sand.

"Got 'im!" said the big rancher, and shook his head regretfully.

CHINK LOPEZ, after sliding through the rear doorway of the Howling Dog, had felt his way along the murky street to a second frame building half a block up the street, where he had unceremoniously pushed open the door and entered.

Ignoring the dozen or so men grouped there in the lobby of Lucifer Flats' one hotel, Lopez clumped up a creaky stairway, went along a corridor, opened a door and entered a room which was lighted by a smoky kerosene lamp perched atop a rickety table.

Seated beside the table, a number of papers before him, was a man.

Jake Seton, though still young, was paunch-bellied, and with flabby-skinned features on which was stamped plainly the story of an evil and dissipated life. Seton was at present ramrod of the Star K spread, one of the biggest outfits along that section of the border, and during the last few months had retained Chink Lopez as his right-hand man.

For, eight months ago, old Dave Kallan, owner of the Star K, had died. And in a prepared will he had stated that the Star K was to be shared half and half by a stepson, Jake Seton, and by an own son, Buck Kallan.

Buck Kallan, the wild young colt, who almost ten years before had, because of a slight misunderstanding between father and son, ridden away from the Star K and had never returned.

Only Buck Kallan knew that his main reason for leaving had been because of the bullying tactics of his older and larger stepbrother, Jake Seton.

Half and half. But, the will had further stated, in case the son could not be located within a year, or in case of the death of either heir, entire possession of the ranch automatically reverted to the remaining heir.

Legal effort to locate the missing Buck Kallan had been made at the time of his father's death, but without success——

AT the gunman's abrupt entrance, Seton raised his eyes impatiently.

"What's up, Chink?" he asked. "You look like you'd seen a ghost."

"Maybe, señor, eet was a ghost!" Though little white blood flowed in the veins of Chink Lopez, he spoke with only a slight slur to his words. "Listen! Eight months ago, I shoot a man from hees saddle. I see heem tumble over a canyon wall, and fall down—down—— I see heem die! But now, señor, that man lives—he ees come back to Lucifer Flats!"

Seton's face blanched, and a startled light seeped into his eyes. "What the hell do you mean?" he spat.

"What I say. Buck Kallan ees alive! I see heem, not five minute ago, in the Howling Dog. With my own eyes, I see heem!"

"There must be a mistake! He can't be alive——"

"I say he *ees* alive!" snarled the border killer. Tersely, he told Seton of the encounter in the Howling Dog.

"You let 'im tromp all over you," Seton sneered, "and didn't kill 'im! Ghost, hell! You slipped up on the job over there in the Thief River country, that's all. You had plenty excuse to let 'im have it a minute ago. Why didn't you do it?"

"You do not know thees Buck Kallan—thees Thief River Keed, as he is called over there," Lopez purred. "I have heard tales. Verree fast, thees Keed ees, and dangerous. Me, I am not afraid, but I take no unnecessary chances."

Seton cursed feelingly. "We've got to get him, quick! And, this time, there'll be no mistake."

"The sand outside ees thick," Lopez grinned sneeringly, "and this Kallan weel not remain all night in the Howling Dog!"

SETON and Lopez left the room, clumped down the stairs and went onto the sand-clogged street.

The wind still howled in from the desert, bringing a shifting curtain of sand that billowed in misty waves along the street. An invisible moon above only slightly dispelled the darkness.

Halfway between the hotel and the Howling Dog Saloon was a squat building that served as a livery stable; and midway between livery stable and saloon, but on the opposite side of the street, was a watering-trough.

Seton and Chink Lopez crossed to this trough, crouched down behind it, guns in hands and thrust over the trough top. From here, through the swirling sand, they could see an orange shaft of light seeping from the windows of the Howling Dog.

Grim-eyed, they settled themselves for the death-watch.

But almost instantly, a dirty shaft of light streamed into the street as the front door of the saloon was flung open. A lithe figure stood framed in the doorway. Then the door was closed, and the figure strode to the hitch-rack near by, untied a pony that stood with drooping head, and started leading the animal along the opposite side of the street toward the livery stable.

Just then, thicker clouds of dust whipped in from the desert, all but obscuring the man and horse. Then there was a rift in the dust-cloud, and for an instant Buck Kallan was etched sharply against the wall of a ramshackle building sixty feet away.

"Now!" Seton snarled.

His gun bellowed, followed by a blasting roar from the gaunt killer's weapon. Through the rolling sand and fogging gun smoke, they saw Buck Kallan stumble, reel drunkenly, then pitch suddenly face forward across the boardwalk beside him and roll from view behind it.

Kallan's horse whirled and, stirrups flapping wildly, galloped down the street and vanished in the billowing sand.

A long minute the two killers crouched there, peering over the trough top. Through the writhing dust they could see a booted foot protruding above the boardwalk across the street—nothing more.

"He won't come back ag'in, not now!" said Jake Seton viciously. "Well, let's get outa here!"

They crossed to the Howling Dog, opened the door and entered. The men crowded in the barroom glanced at them as they entered, then went with studied carelessness about what they had supposedly been doing.

Chink scowled about the room, a challenge in his sullen eyes. Seton's eyes swept the room shrewdly.

"Men," said Seton smoothly, "there's just been a little trouble outside. Some fool cowpoke, who was maybe drunk, tried to crowd Lopez off the walk.

There was some words, and the young fool goes for his shooter. My man killed 'im—he's lyin' out there beside the walk. A clear case of self-defense."

Every man in the room knew Seton was lying, but no man dared voice his opinion. They retained their impartial silence as Seton and Chink Lopez stalked to the bar and ordered brandy.

Abruptly, as they were raising their glasses, the door was flung open, letting in a hot blast of wind and stinging sand.

The two Star K men whirled, and at what they saw, their filled glasses crashed against the bar. They stood, backs to the bar, stark surprise mirrored on their evil features.

SLOWLY Buck Kallan forced the door to, slitted eyes staring coldly at the two men who had just tried to murder him. Hatless, with blood oozing from a ragged bullet-slash across his temple, he stood on wide-spread legs, right arm stiff at his side, left hand hanging over the low-slung six-gun on his thigh.

His voice rasped harshly in the dead silence. "That's twice you've bungled the job, Chink, you and that yellow-bellied skunk beside you—twice you've bushwhacked me and left me alayin' for dead! Now I aim to fix you so you won't never gun nobody else in the back!"

There was an edge of desperate fear to Seton's voice. "What the hell are you talkin' about?" he cried.

"Got a bad memory, ain't you, Jake?" Buck Kallan sneered. "But it's too late for that to help you—now. This is the showdown, and there won't be any slipup in this li'l' game. Don't recognize yore long-lost stepbrother, li'l' Buck Kallan, do you? Like hell you don't! Made a big show o' lookin' for me when my dad died, didn't you? And claimed I couldn't be found!"

The glare of a cornered rat in his eyes, Seton snarled hoarsely: "I don't know what yo're talkin' about! Yo're crazy!"

"More bad memory, eh?" sneered the Thief River Kid. "You found me, all right, easy enough, for you knew where I was alla time—knew I was ridin' for a tough outfit over on Thief River.

"They didn't call me Buck Kallan over there; they called me the Thief River Kid, and said I was tough and mighty fast with a gun. Wasn't satisfied with half the Star K, was you? So you send Chink Lopez, there, over to Thief River to see that I didn't never show up to claim my half.

"What'd you pay him for that job, Jake? 'Cause he bungled. Oh, he tried hard enough. He hid behind a rock and knocked me from my saddle with a rifle bullet. He saw me slide over a canyon wall and roll a hundred feet. Then he rode back and told you I was dead and that the Star K was all yore's.

"But I was stubborn, Jake—I didn't die, though I came mighty close to it. An old prospector fished me from the wall and carried me to his hut in the hills. Seven long months I stayed at that hut. I could have left sooner, only I had a reason for stayin'. See this stiff right arm? Before Chink knocked me over that wall, it was the fastest gun hand along the border; now I won't never use it again.

I had to learn to draw and shoot all over—left-handed. Every hour of every day, for four months, I practiced, lookin' forward and dreamin' of the time I'd meet you two low-lived skunks! For I'd seen that damned grinnin' yellow face before I went over the wall, and knowed it was Jake's playful way o' sendin' his regards."

"Men," Jake Seton appealed in a slightly shrill voice to the silent, tense-bodied men scattered about the room, but without taking his eyes from the Thief River Kid, "you can see this hombre's crazy! I call on you to wit-

ness he's forcin' us into a fight. When we down 'im——"

"You ain't gonna kill me, Jake," again Buck Kallan's contemptuous voice rasped like a file on steel. "Why d'you think I spent them four months practicin'? Left-handed, I'm faster than I ever was with my right. You two snakes don't deserve a chance to live, but I'm givin' yuh a last chance—now!"

As Kallan's bitter, accusing voice ceased abruptly, the hollow bellowing of the wind again intruded, tearing with noisy fingers at the doors and windows. No spectator of the stark drama spoke, for every man knew that sudden death was about to stalk the dirty barroom.

Buck Kallan spoke to Seton, but his wary eyes were on Chink Lopez—Lopez, who stood with huge body half-crouched, a horrid stare in his sullen slant eyes, a fixed grin twitching his cruel lips, yellow talons hanging over gun butts, looking like an infuriated panther crouched for the death-leap. Lopez, the fastest and most brutal killer along that section of the border.

Jake Seton stood with one hand on the bar, flabby face gone suddenly white, craven fear in his ratlike eyes. His lips worked wordlessly, and from deep in his throat ensued whimpering, animal sounds.

"Not scared, are you, Chink?" Buck Kallan's voice was sneering, taunting, impatient. "Left-handed—and two to one—maybe you'll get me. What're you waitin' on?"

Suddenly a snarl of fury and hate ripped from Lopez's twisted lips, and his yellow hands swooped with amazing speed to gun butts.

Seton cursed hysterically, grabbed for his own gun.

Then the left hand of the Thief River Kid moved, moved with such unbelievable speed that no man in the room was ever able to explain how the long-barreled six-gun got into the hand.

They saw smoke writhing from the gun's arcing muzzle, ducked as its blasting roar shook the building three times with such successive swiftness that the roar seemed almost as one.

Chink Lopez, right-hand gun just clearing leather, slammed back against the bar, the hate in his staring eyes supplanted by the certain knowledge that he was dying.

Full in the chest Buck Kallan's first two bullets caught him; and, already dead, the border killer pitched forward on his face.

The third bullet plowed through Jake Seton's middle. Seton, stiff lips gibbering with fear, hand still clawing futilely at his gun, sprawled across the bar and hung there grotesquely.

Slowly Buck Kallan holstered his smoking gun, freckled young face no longer twisted by bitterness and hate, in his clear eyes a shadow of something that might have been regret.

Unashamedly the bearded rancher, who had warned Buck earlier in the night, heaved his bulk from behind a poker table. His boots thudded loud as he strode toward the young cowboy, and his voice rumbled in the silence.

"Welcome to Lucifer Flats, Kid! We been needin' you a long time. We got plenty o' sand hereabouts, but maybe not enough o' the kind you've showed to-night—the kind it took to give them two buzzards there their just needin's. Shake!"

"Belly up, gents," grinned the red-headed buckaroo, "and h'ist one to the passin' o' the Thief River Kid! But Buck Kallan's here, neighbors, and he's come back to Lucifer Flats to stay. Sody-pop, barkeep, for me!"

Another National Park

AMERICA is becoming more and more conscious of its heritage; it is becoming more and more interested in preserving for posterity hitherto unknown spots which contain relics of our past, or which offer marvelous scenery of real American nature.

We already have several outstanding national parks, which contain sights to rival the best that any parts of the world can offer. They have not been fully appreciated, and still do not receive their full share of credit, although the new movement to appreciate America more has given them a part of their just praise. And we are getting more and more interested in discovering other spots to set aside as national parks and national monuments.

One of the newest proposed sites for a national park is an immense section of land on the Utah-Arizona border, near the Navajo reservation. Most of it has not been traversed by white man, and has not been charted. A preliminary survey of several thousand square miles—only a small part of the entire section—makes official much of the tribute which has been given to this section by the few travelers who have discovered its beauties.

Even in the strict official report, the beauty of the land is extolled:

"Almost the entire region explored is of outstanding scenic quality—indeed it may be said to be both spectacular and unique. The area is as outstanding from the point of view of scientific interest as it is scenically.

"Investigations have indicated that the archaeological story, when more completely worked out, may be one of the most complete and fascinating of the whole Southwest. There are many geological problems of utmost importance which demand solution. For the other biological sciences, the region presents almost a virgin field."

The new land is scarcely a hundred miles from the Grand Canyon of the Colorado—our world-famous national park. Further west is Yosemite National Park, another monument to American beauty and scenic wonders. Northward is Yellowstone National Park. And in this new section, the beauty and marvels of all of these, together with many new amazing sights, seem to be combined.

Two fantastic canyons are among the sights to be admired here; one of them cut by the Colorado River itself, the other by a tributary. There are other gorges, deep-cut by rivers for ages, with their steep sides smooth-washed out of hard stone by the endless rush of waters.

Over one of these deep-carved ravines is Rainbow Bridge, a huge natural bridge that rivals any of the existing similar wonders. This massive, solid-rock arch is high enough to go over our national capitol, yet it seems dwarfed in comparison with the huge spires of cliffs. All about it are great stone masses, rugged cliff sides which give the impression of another and more fantastic planet.

In another section of the land is Monument Valley, one of the most unusual and most interesting sights in the world. Pictures taken of this Valley have aroused comment wherever they were shown, and are one of the most potent

factors in the drive to have this section, or at least some parts of it, retained as a national park.

Monument Valley is one continuous, strange landscape. It presents a great mesa country, but instead of just the ordinary high tablelike plateaus to dot the terrain, huge, sheer masses of rock rise up to heights of hundreds of feet, the result of some strange phase of the earth's erosion.

These pillars are almost needlelike in their sharpness, and they are abundant. Again and again they seem to be gathered in strange formations, very much like the ruins of an ancient Rome. Yet all of it is entirely natural. Topping some of these groups is a master spire of one thousand feet!

These are but a few of the outstanding spectacles in this territory. Others have not yet been officially recorded, because the surveying party has not completed its work. However, the first reports were so enthusiastic that a larger survey group has been organized, and is now working on a complete report for the entire section. There seems to be no doubt as to the result of the survey.

In addition to the beauty of the section, there is a tremendous fund of information in the relics found there. There is much evidence that the section was inhabited by Indians in prehistoric days. Groups of cliff dwellings, when they are studied carefully, are apt to give us a great deal of new information on the original inhabitants of our country. Some of these cliff dwellings have as high as two hundred rooms—and their age and workmanship will make them stand up well with the best examples we have yet uncovered.

There are dinosaur tracks in the region, and bones that are supposed to be relics of hairy mastodons and other prehistoric creatures on which science has not yet found complete information.

Also, there are queer rock formations and mineral deposits, unlike those found in other regions. Whether these will mean anything when they are carefully analyzed is hard to say. However, nothing more is expected of them than that they might give students of the earth a better idea of the condition of this land many ages ago.

Already, government action has made the Rainbow Bridge and the Monument Valley national "monuments"—which is government recognition of the value of these spots. Whenever any part of our land proves itself important enough, historically or scenically, to be saved for the enjoyment of every one, it is designated as a national monument. To develop a national park from a national monument is a simple and natural step, so advocates of the proposal to have this section made a national park are quite enthusiastic.

The possibilities are all in favor of success of the movement. When hardened investigators become ecstatic in their descriptions of the beauties of a place, there must be something to it. And every one who has set foot into this section has come out singing its praises. For example, the man who discovered the Mesa Verde ruins, and who is well acquainted with this spot of land, enthusiastically lets you know that ". . . that country certainly needs looking into."

Every American who is proud of his country wants to see more and more of these spots set aside as national parks. Every bit we can do to keep the beauties of our country before the people will make them more appreciative of the land, and better citizens, in addition to giving them marvelous beauty spots for enjoyment and relaxation. Making America a land of parks will make our country better throughout.

A STREET & SMITH PUBLICATION

DOC SAVAGE

10¢ MAGAZINE

The old prospector loved candy—and when the sheriff solved his murder it was

Sweet Justice

By Joe Archibald

SHERIFF SAM GALE stepped from the porch of the frame building, tossed a half-burnt cigarette from his fingers and squinted through the sun's glare toward something becoming visible at the end of Dold City's main street.

"I'm an ornery coyote if it ain't Sweet-tooth Charlie back again!" exclaimed the sheriff, grinning. "The old desert rat's been gone four months, an'——" Sam Gale's brows knitted as he watched old Charlie's burro mince along the dusty street. There was something alien about the little animal's carriage.

Heretofore, when "Sweet-tooth Charlie" came back from a fruitless quest for bright yellow gold, the burro would exude an aura of deepest gloom. Today, however, its ears were not laid flat and its muzzle did not scrape the dust

as heavy hoofs plodded onward. The burro's head was lifted as it came on and its step, like that of the old sourdough who walked beside it, was decidedly jaunty.

Sweet-tooth Charlie's weather-beaten, bewhiskered face was radiant as he waved a hand at people in the street. An onus of twenty years seemed to have dropped from Sweet-tooth Charlie's ancient shoulders. There was a spring to his step, and through his unruly beard seeped an exultant whistle. Right to the saloon trekked the old man and his little burro, and there they stopped.

The burro dipped its nose deep into the turbid depths of a watering trough. Charlie took off his battered hat and whirled it around his head.

"Yip-p-peeee!" he shouted.

"Greetin's, Charlie," Sam Gale grinned as he went out to meet the arrival. "Looks like you've found the rainbow with the pot of gold."

"Yep, Sam," enthused Sweet-tooth Charlie; "yep, I got it! Struck it at last, Sam. Lookit this poke!"

He reached to his belt and fumbled at some fastenings. Then he lifted a heavy leather sack high.

"Pay dirt!" he exclaimed. "Lots more where she come from. Le's celeebrate!"

Excitement in Dold City was at fever pitch as the news spread from mouth to mouth. Sweet-tooth Charlie had struck a bonanza.

All tracks led to the saloon, but Charlie had other desires at the moment besides strong drink. With Sam Gale and several other wide-eyed citizens at his heels, Sweet-tooth walked over to Ben Wacker's Emporium of General Merchandise and slammed the poke down on the counter.

"Bring 'em out, Ben," he said. "It's my day to howl. Bring out them peppermint candies I like so well an' everythin' else yuh got that's made of merlasses an' sugar. Ain't bit into a mite of candy in nigh on three months. The supply I took didn't last."

Mouth watering, Sweet-tooth Charlie scooped up a big paper bag filled to the brim and tucked it under his arm. With his gnarled hands he opened up his poke and spilled three nuggets to the counter.

"That squares us, Ben"—and he crammed a piece of candy into his mouth. "Reckon now I can stand me a drink to wash the alkali out of my gullet. C'mon, Sam, I'm settin' 'em up."

"Ain't none of my business, Charlie," Sam Gale said in warning, "but I figger you're makin' a sight too much of a holler about that poke yuh got. Yuh never can tell what kind of coyotes come into town. They'll likely as not take it away from yuh."

"Let 'em," chuckled the lucky old man, his mouth filled with coconut taffy. "I got me more whenever I want it. Been thirty year, Sam, since I started out. Now I found it. Yep, it's my day to howl!"

Old Sweet-tooth Charlie's celebration was short-lived. Used to solitude, the noise and tumult of Dold City soon grated on his peace of mind.

"Figger that's 'nough hell-raising," he decided, and took his departure. "I'm goin' out to my cabin where it's nice an' peaceful-like. Reckon yuh'll find me there, Sam, if yuh ever pass by," he said in parting.

And as he walked down the dusty street, alongside of his burro, old Sweet-tooth Charlie chawed on a chunk of candy with insatiable gusto.

Not long after the old sourdough's departure, three horsemen rode into town. One slouched in the saddle—a disreputable-looking individual with a battered hat tipped back over an ill-kempt sandy thatch of hair. His red-rimmed eyes flashed at the men who rode with him, one on either side.

The holster at his hip was dangling empty.

Sheriff Sam Gale walked out to the hitching rack and surveyed the trio with quizzical eyes.

"Well, if 'tain't young Hadley," he gritted. "Where'd yuh find him, Segler? What's he done?"

"Ain't pinned a thing on him, sheriff," growled Hamm Segler, "but Larkin an' me found him out near Ghost Gap where them stages have been held up. I bet he knows about them jobs. We brought him in."

"Takin' a lot on yourselves, ain't yuh?" Sam Gale slung at Segler. "Since when have you been my deputies? Let 'im go!"

Hamm Segler's eyes flashed. He shot a sneering glance at Larkin. The two laughed brittly.

"I told yuh," the former said to Larkin. "The sheriff ain't int'rested in who held up them stages. Why an innocent-lookin' gent like Squint Hadley here wouldn't never do nothin' since he's Sweet-tooth Charlie's nephew. Of course not!"

Segler handed back Hadley's gun as he spoke. The kid looked sullenly at Gale as he swung his horse away from the rack.

"Where you been, Squint?" the sheriff asked him. "Charlie came back this afternoon."

"Hah!" the kid laughed. "Lookin' for a grubstake ag'in, huh?"

A man laughed. "Not much he wa'n't," he exclaimed. "He's struck it rich! He come in with a poke big enough to choke a bronc. Lots more where he got that, too. Look what yuh lost, Squint."

Segler and Larkin stiffened in their saddles and stared at the spokesman. Suddenly a glitter appeared in Segler's eyes.

"Oh, I see, sheriff," he sneered. "Couldn't hold Hadley as no suspect, with all that dinero in the fam'ly. Maybe lookin' for a favor from Charlie. Well, when the election rolls around, nobody'll forgit it. Yuh only got three more months, Gale."

Eyes hard, the sheriff stared Segler out of countenance. "When that time comes, Segler, we'll see."

Larkin and Segler edged away. Four months before, on the day that Sweet-tooth Charlie had departed for the clime which had produced riches for him, the two men had come to Dold City. Brant Larkin had just been made foreman of the Lazy H Ranch, an outfit run by a grizzled old plains pirate by name of McNitt.

Larkin had come to see Gale about the rustling of the Lazy H cattle, and upon seeing a man of Sam's age, he had evinced surprise.

"No wonder they don't catch the skunks," he had said. "Sheriff, this county needs a younger man. A man maybe like Segler, here. Meet Hamm Segler, he's one of the fastest hombres with a gun I've ever seen. Reckon I'll git into politics in this county. Need young blood runnin' your office, Gale."

And ever since, Larkin had stirred up resentment against Sam Gale. The minority, older men like himself, had stuck by the sheriff, but it seemed inevitable that the fall election would spell his doom.

"Squint" Hadley, at the mention of his uncle's strike, curled his lips in a wolfish grin, rubbed an unshaven chin with the tip of a horny thumb, and stared toward the hills.

"The old cuss did it, eh?" he smirked. "Well, he owes me some of that dust. I aim to go out an' git it."

"Look here, kid," said Sam Gale, "he owes you nothin'. He took you out with him when you come from Denver a pink-eyed tenderfoot. You couldn't stand the gaff. You even lit out on him with most of his grub, I remember."

Squint Hadley laughed harshly. "Don't preach to me, sheriff," he

sneered. "I ain't owin' you nothin' for what you said to Segler. They got nothin' on me. I aim to go out an' take what he owes me. Nobody is goin' to stop me."

"Go ahead," said Gale. "Charlie'll give yuh a stake. But yuh don't deserve none. You're nothin' but a low-down saddle tramp!" The sheriff laughed. "An' Segler an' Larkin thinkin' you was hombre enough to hold up a stage, ha!"

He spat and walked away.

"I'll show yuh," Hadley muttered. "I'll show yuh!"

As the sun was going down Squint Hadley rode out of Dold City. Hamm Segler and Brant Larkin saw him go, then both walked into Sam Gale's office.

"Lettin' him go out an' steal Charlie's poke, huh?" Larkin cracked. "He's no good. There'll be trouble. You'd ought to've locked that maverick up, Gale. I'll tellin' you for your own good. That Squint Hadley is a bad hombre, Gale, an'——"

"S'posin' you foller him," the sheriff proposed irritably. "Go ahead—you an' Segler."

"We're leavin'," said Larkin. "Segler an' me are ridin' back to the ranch. We ain't your deputies, Gale. When they elect Segler sheriff, we'll clean up this county. The hombres who raise cows'll git some protection. G'night."

As the pair rode out of town, Sam Gale sat huddled in his chair. For half an hour he pondered, uneasiness stirring within him.

Squint Hadley was broke. The sheriff had seen him come out of a saloon just before he rode away, and Hadley had bummed just enough drinks to make him ugly. Once he caught a glimpse of those nuggets discovered by Sweet-tooth Charlie, Squint Hadley was liable to——

Sam Gale got up, belted on his guns and walked out of the office. He saddled his bay in the stable and several minutes later was riding toward the old cabin which Sweet-tooth Charlie called home.

A mile from the old prospector's, the trail dipped down into the rock-strewn bed of an arroyo. The sheriff rode along this bleak stretch for several rods before urging his bronc toward a trail that diverged from it. Suddenly he stiffened in his saddle. A shot had rung out, and it had not come from far away.

Swearing softly, Sam spurred his bay to a swift pace. That shot had come from the neighborhood of the old prospector's cabin.

Sheriff Gale topped a high ridge studded with jackpine and looked down toward a gorge at the mouth of which squatted Sweet-tooth Charlie's humble abode. A light was burning in the cabin.

Gale's attention was quickly diverted from the fact, however, by the sound of hoofbeats feverishly drumming against lush earth. At the foot of the slope which swept down from the high ridge, there was a stretch of flat ground visible through a gap in a clump of box elders. Across that space swept a horseman.

Sam Gale yanked out his gun and fired. Darkness was near, and the swift-moving blob was not an easy target. The bullet missed its mark as the sheriff yelled and steadied himself in the saddle to blaze away again.

The rider viciously yanked at his reins and shouted at the sheriff. His bronc, bit ripping cruelly at the corners of its slavering jaws, raised up in a wild pawing. When its front hoofs crashed down again, the rider lifted both hands over his head.

"D-don't shoot!" he cried out jerkily. "I——"

Sam Gale drove his own horse through a clump of sage and brought it to a halt before the night rider. His

gun leveled, he leaned forward in the saddle.

The rider was Squint Hadley.

"Who fired that shot?" grated the sheriff. "You, Squint?"

The man seemed frozen with terror. For several moments his throat failed to squeeze out a sound. In the darkness his face shone white.

"Y-yeah, sheriff," he finally stammered with effort. "I fired at a couple of hombres. They was comin' out of Charlie's cabin. I chased 'em."

"You been in that cabin, haven't yuh, Squint?" Sheriff Gale cracked harshly. "You started for it an hour ago. You——" He looked toward the place and his spine chilled. There was an unnatural silence hovering over the vicinity of the old sourdough's hut. "Answer me!"

"Yeah, I been in," the man confessed, "an' I asked him for a stake. He gimme a mite, but 'twa'n't enough. I told him so. He got mad an' drove me out, sheriff. I didn't go away. I hid down by the box elders to wait until he'd hit his bunk.

"Then, when I was goin' back, I seen a couple of hombres ride up an' go in. I thought I heard a six-gun after they'd been in for a couple of minutes. When they come out they was both masked. I fired a shot at 'em, and then I got scared an' got on my horse. I didn't dast go an' look into the——"

Squint Hadley's fear seemed genuine, yet his story sounded false to the sheriff's ear.

"Hand me your gun, Squint," ordered Sam Gale. "We're going to look in on Sweet-tooth Charlie. Seems mighty queer," he added. "Charlie ought to've heard us out here."

Beneath his wide-brimmed hat the sheriff's hair lifted. Squint Hadley said nothing, though the muscles of his ashen face twitched nervously.

Sam dismounted in front of the prospector's shack. "Git down, Squint!" he ordered. Then he turned to look in through the half-open door of the shack. A hoarse gasp jerked from his throat, and he leaped to the door and pushed it wide.

Sweet-tooth Charlie was sprawled face downward on the floor. A pool of blood widened beneath his prone figure. At a glance, the sheriff could see that the old prospector was dead.

Sam Gale knelt down and looked at the body closely.

"Shot in the back!" he gritted after a moment. "Squint——"

Terror racked Hadley's miserable frame. "I—I—didn't do it, so help me, sheriff! I didn't——"

"There's an empty shell in your gun," Sam Gale lashed out. "I heard a shot, Squint. Sounded clear like it was outside in the open. But then the skunk could've stood just outside the door an' plugged Charlie!"

"I—I—didn't do it, sheriff," Squint quavered. "Honest, sheriff, it was like I said."

Suddenly Sam Gale's jaw slackened and his eyes popped wider as he saw something weighted down by Charlie's fist. It was a piece of rough wrapping paper, and on it had been scrawled a message.

At first, the crazy writing was almost indecipherable. It was the rambling scrawl of a man groping blindly with a makeshift implement, and Sam wondered what Sweet-tooth Charlie had used for ink. He gently removed the paper from under the dead hand and examined it minutely.

The unmistakable odor of tobacco assailed his nostrils. He looked at Charlie's weather-beaten face. One cheek of the dead man bulged.

Strange thoughts began to run through the sheriff's mind. "Writ in tobacco juice," he mumbled.

His eyes strayed to the dead man's right hand. Between the thumb and

forefinger was a long wooden splinter. It seemed apparent that before Charlie had died he had ripped the splinter from the floor and had written his last message.

Sam Gale held the paper close to the light while Squint Hadley looked on, a shivering hulk. Bit by bit, the import of the writing became clear.

SQUINT HADLEY DONE IT. HE——

"Look at that, Squint," the sheriff cracked, and shoved the paper at Hadley. "He branded the killer 'fore he died. He said it was you!"

"No, no, sheriff!" Squint shrieked. "No, Charlie wouldn't—he couldn't! I didn't do it! I——"

Gale shoved the message into his pocket. He swiveled. His eyes encountered something on the table. It was a paper bag.

The sheriff picked it up and dumped the contents on the table. The last of Charlie's sweetmeats—three sizable chunks of coconut taffy. A bleak grin appeared on the sheriff's face.

"Charlie shore liked his candy, didn't he, Squint?" he shot at the ashen-faced Hadley. "Harmless old critter. Any skunk that'd kill him ought to hang."

Gale picked up the lamp from the table and set it down on the floor, close to the dead man. He looked at Charlie's nails. They had not been trimmed for a long time and were as hard as turtle shell.

Within six inches of the dead hand was a gash in the boards from which the splinter had been torn. Gale looked the place over with practiced scrutiny. An old nail head had been exposed. Something had scraped against it, breaking away some of the rust. The sallow light cast by the lamp shone on a tiny object close to the nail head.

A cold smile bisected Sheriff Gale's leathery countenance as he rose, pocketing his find in his vest.

"Charlie was a tough old buzzard, Squint," he commented to Hadley. "He lived a little while after yuh plugged him. See what he done, don't you? Just writ me a note."

Slumped in a chair, frozen with dread, Squint Hadley watched the sheriff go to the table and pick up a piece of taffy. He saw Gale cram it into his mouth. It made his cheek bulge distortingly. Then Sam Gale gently spread a blanket over Sweet-tooth Charlie's gruesome remains.

"I told yuh I didn't do it," Hadley persisted, but his lips were loose and shaking. "It was like I said, Gale. I——"

"Couldn't git his poke, eh, Squint?" the sheriff snapped. "He told yuh to git out, and when yuh got outside yuh pulled a gun. Then yuh went back and opened up the door quietlike, and yuh seen Charlie with his back to the door and yuh let 'im have it!

"That story about them riders was pretty loco, Squint. That was a pretty poor alibi, even for a dumb coyote like you are. Yuh fired the shot, all right. That's the only part I believe of what yuh told me. Huh, I'm takin' yuh into town, Squint. I'm lockin' yuh up, pronto!"

The desperation of a trapped animal burned in Squint Hadley's eyes and consumed the terror that had shone there before. His hand struck for his hip as Sam Gale shoved him out of the door.

The sheriff laughed icily, however, and lunged at Squint with a crack to the side of the jaw with his big fist. The man collapsed, his six-gun dropping into the dirt.

"That's a pretty good confession, Squint," Gale said. "Well, git onto your bronc."

"They'll hang me, sheriff," the miserable saddle tramp quavered. "I ain't got a chance."

"Neither had poor ol' Charlie,

Squint," responded the sheriff through hard lips. "Move, pronto!"

THOSE citizens who were lolling about the main street of Dold City wasted but a casual glance on Sam Gale and his prisoner as they rode into town. But when they saw the sheriff get down from his horse in front of the jail and wave a gun at Squint, they hurriedly gathered into a wondering group.

As Sam ushered Hadley into the jail, the group surged in a body toward the building.

"What's he done, sheriff?" a man queried crisply. "I knowed he was a bad 'un, a danged coyote."

Squint Hadley jerked out a gasp of fear and clutched Gale's arm. "Don't let 'em——"

"Lockin' Hadley up," the sheriff said quietly, "for the murder of Sweet-tooth Charlie."

Intakes of breath could be heard. "Sweet-tooth Charlie!" some one ripped out. "Dead? Y' ain't goin' to lock 'im up, sheriff? Let's hang the dirty coyote!" The speaker whirled and waved every one to silence. "Goin' tuh lock Hadley up, Gale is. He shot Sweet-tooth——"

The word spread. An ugly undercurrent was evident as time slipped by. Faces were dark.

Sheriff Sam Gale stood out in front of his office, both guns bared.

"I'm holdin' Hadley!" he roared at the growing crowd. "I'm responsible. He'll go to trial. You'll git a hangin'. Charlie branded the killer before he died. But it'll be a legal hangin'. No lynchin'. The first man that pulls a gun gets dropped. Savvy?"

The menacing group receded a bit. Finally it broke up, sullen, muttering.

But Sam Gale knew that the spark of lust for killing was still smoldering, had not gone out by any means. As soon as a leader stepped forward, they would——

JUST after midnight, Hamm Segler and Brant Larkin rode into town. Behind them loped a trio of hard-eyed cowmen. Segler rode up to where Sam Gale sat, and got down from his horse.

"We got the word, Gale," spat Larkin. "We want Hadley!" As he spoke, Larkin took three steps forward.

The sheriff eyed him closely. Larkin seemed to limp slightly.

"What's the matter, Larkin?" queried Sam Gale evenly. "Fall off your bronc?"

The man stiffened. "Horse shied at a rattler an' sidled into a barbed-wire fence," he replied. "But that ain't important, Gale. You know what we come for."

"Sure," the sheriff said. "But yuh don't git him, sabe?"

His eyes wandered to Larkin's horse. Its rump shone sleek in the light cast by a street lamp. Across the beast's left flank was a significant slash.

Swiftly Gale's mind clicked. Squint Hadley had shot at the men he had seen getting away from the cabin. If a bullet passed along the flank of a horse, Sam Gale reasoned, it could easily crease the leg of the rider. And Larkin had seemed to favor his left leg.

Lips clamped tight, his heart pounding, the sheriff got to his feet.

"You heard me, Larkin!" he rapped out. "You don't git Hadley."

Hamm Segler whirled and faced the gathering crowd. "You heerd 'im, gents!" he roared. "We know Hadley is guilty. A skunk don't deserve a trial. Not when he shoots a pore ol' cuss like Charlie in the back. We let it pass when the sheriff took him away from us this morning. We was pretty sure Squint Hadley was a lowdown cattle thief.

"We was hired to stop the rustlin' of beef from the Lazy H. But Gale, here, don't want nobody to help enforce the law. Now he's up agin' a cold deck. He knows Larkin is a lowdown yeller killer an' wants to help 'im jest the

same. Come on, we'll take him! It's time we took the law——"

Segler spat into the dirt and waved for the sullen, muttering crowd to advance.

Sheriff Sam Gale waved the surging crowd back. "I make you a proposition," he cried. "This seems to be between me and Larkin. He's leading you. I'll take off my badge, meet him man to man. With fists! Whoever stands up after it's over has his way."

A sneering, gloating laugh jerked from Hamm Segler. "Brant," he swaggered to Larkin, "you'll break the old cuss in two. Go ahead; we're agreein', sheriff!"

Sam Gale fumbled at the badge on his vest. He tugged at it but it would not come loose.

"Lend me your jackknife, Larkin," he said. "This thing's rusted on."

"Shore," agreed the big man through smirking lips. "Shore." He plunged a hand into his back pocket. "Huh," he said finally, "I must've left it in my shack. Segler, lend the sheriff your knife."

Hamm Segler stepped forward and handed the sheriff a bone-handled jackknife. Larkin backed away as Gale opened the big blade with the thumbnail of his right hand. Suddenly the owner of the knife uttered a hoarse exclamation.

Sam Gale was busily examining the point of the blade.

"Shoot!" Segler yelled at Larkin. "He's tricked—— Git that knife, or he'll——"

The sheriff gripped the knife by the blade, flipped it savagely at a hitching post a few feet away from where he stood. The blade sunk in fully an inch. The bone handle quivered as Gale struck for his guns.

Brant Larkin, goaded to desperation by Hamm Segler's warning, had leaped sidewise toward the door of the office and was drawing his .45s even as the sheriff flipped the knife.

"Come an' git the knife!" Sam Gale roared, and shot from the hip.

Segler fired a split-second later. The bullet tore through the sheriff's shoulder and kicked him back a step.

Larkin cursed as a bullet ripped along the back of his gun hand.

Gale's guns crashed out like rolling thunder. Segler went down before the terrific hail of lead.

Larkin reeled backward toward the horses, one hand hanging useless. Backed up against Sam Gale's own mount, he laughed crazily and smashed a shot at the sheriff.

"Shoot, damn yuh!" he shouted. "Segler, give it to the damn old skunk!"

Sam Gale spun to the right. Segler had lifted his torn body from the ground. On hands and knees, he was steadying his right wrist with his left hand. His six-gun was lifted toward Gale.

The sheriff shot Segler through the head just as Brant Larkin's .45 slug tore through the cloth of his coat.

Larkin swore, and yanked the trigger again. The hammer fell on a dead cartridge. The man snarled like a wolf, then flung the empty gun at Gale's head.

The sheriff threw his own gun onto the ground and charged at Larkin as the man tried frantically to reach his horse.

A hook-nosed individual, one of the Segler-Larkin faction, drew a gun. A shot boomed out as Gale reached the hitching rack. Larkin's henchman doubled up as if he had been struck in the stomach by a battering ram. His legs buckled and he pitched forward on his face.

Four men rushed from the cover to which the crowd had stampeded when the guns began to roar.

"Go for your guns, yuh rats!" yelled one. "We're with Sam Gale. Let's see another skunk reach for his hardware!"

Larkin's men remained stiff in their tracks. Hands up, they backed to the center of the street.

Their leader, whirling from the head of his horse, knew that escape was impossible. He lunged at Sam Gale as the sheriff's fingers clawed for his throat. The impact of the two heavy bodies meeting was like the sound of a flat board cracking against a sack of flour.

Larkin spun half around. A gasp of pain jerked from the sheriff's lips as his attacker's powerful frame smashed into his shoulder.

"I'll kill yuh, yuh blasted coyote!" Brant Larkin raged, and tore a Winchester loose from a saddle sheath. He gripped it by the barrel and swung it around his head.

Gale ducked low. "Well, how does this suit yuh?" Putting every ounce of his waning strength behind the blow, he smashed Larkin in the midriff with a clublike fist.

The Winchester dropped from the man's grasp and caromed off the sheriff's lamed shoulder. Gale staggered back, almost blind with pain. But through the mist that formed before his eyes, he could see Larkin doubled in a knot and leaning against the foreleg of his horse.

The beast shied to the left and sent Larkin sprawling at Gale's boots. The man clawed to his feet, stood swaying like a giant timber cut through at the base.

With the red mist still veiling his eyes, Sam Gale delivered a crashing blow to Larkin's face. Then he reeled A man caught him and held him on his feet.

LATER, in the sheriff's office, Gale looked through the bars at Brant Larkin. The man's face was swollen and discolored. His bloodshot eyes gleamed balefully as Sam Gale spoke.

"That li'l piece of steel I picked off Charlie's floor just fits the end of Segler's knife!" he said deliberately. "An' Sweet-tooth Charlie was s'posed to've written that note in the cabin—in tobacco juice!"

The sheriff laughed shortly, derisively. "You forgot how much Charlie liked his candy. He wasn't a chawin' man, Brant. He was eatin' one of them big chunks of coconut taffy when yuh come in on 'im. I had one myself. It shore makes a gent's cheek bulge out.

"Segler chawed tobacco, didn't he? When yuh shot Charlie, Segler chipped a splinter out of the floor to write that message with. His knife struck a nail an' it bit off the end of his blade. Just a li'l piece of steel, but enough tuh give the snap away."

The sheriff looked at Squint Hadley who was slumped in a chair, his miserable frame shaking as if overridden by ague.

"I knew Squint didn't do it when I looked the layout over," Gale went on. "I knew old Charlie would never have had strength enough to dig a splinter out of the floor with his finger nail, after having been plugged; so I figgered somebody planted that note. But I had to bring Squint in an' hold him for murder so's the real killers would come in an' show their hands. They would want to put his neck in a noose in a hurry, seein' as how the case would be closed then. I wasn't far from right, was I, Larkin?"

"Why, the dirty coyotes!" some one rapped out. "It looks like a hangin' anyways, sheriff. Let's don't lose no time on a trial."

Larkin's bruised face paled further. He got up from his stool and staggered toward the door of his cell.

"Sheriff, 'twan't me," he wailed in a hoarse, terror-stricken voice. "Segler, he done it—he killed 'em! I told him not to. Segler——"

"Yuh knew Squint Hadley was goin' out tuh see Charlie," the sheriff cut in.

"You didn't know, though, that after Squint saw the old feller, he went out an' hid, because he was goin' back tuh rob Sweet-tooth Charlie himself. But you come along—and then when Squint seen yuh come out of the cabin, he figgered somethin' was wrong an' he blazed away at yuh.

"That's when I tagged yuh, Larkin. That bullet kind of sawed past your leg just below the knee, an' it was some tender. I cinched it with the piece of blade that was snapped off Segler's knife!

"Where's the dust yuh stole? Looks like yuh killed Charlie, because maybe he had a map, too, tuh show where his claim is. Inside the cabin the shot was muffled. I only heard one—Squint's snap shot at you two coyotes! It's all over, Larkin. *Yore* neck'll git the rope, not Squint's."

Sam Gale smiled grimly, and he fished a hand into his pocket. It came out holding a wad of brown-stained paper, which he opened up. He worked a sticky mass off the paper and crammed it into his mouth.

"Coconut taffy," he mouthed, at the beaten man. "Have one on Sweet-tooth Charlie, Larkin. Never knew he didn't chaw tobacco, did yuh?" And the sheriff tossed the bag in through the bars of the cell.

NATURAL BRIDGE OF ARIZONA

ALTHOUGH much has been written of the scenic wonders of the West, little or no mention has been made of the Natural Bridge of Arizona—the greatest natural bridge in the United States. Located in the central portion of the State, and on the western part of the famed Tonto Basin, the bridge is by far the biggest of its kind.

It is so large that at one time a hermit living on a small farm near it, had a five-acre orchard on the top of the bridge!

The great arch is located in wild and rocky country and was formed, as all natural bridges, by water erosion. The size of it can be shown by a comparison with other bridges of its kind—the Natural Bridge of Virginia and the Rainbow Bridge of Utah.

The Natural Bridge of Arizona is over five hundred feet long, five times longer than the Natural Bridge of Virginia. It is six hundred feet in width, making it twelve times as wide as the Virginia bridge. In height it is forty feet less, but if the measurement is taken from the bottom of the erosion pit, the Natural Bridge of Arizona is forty feet higher.

It has a span greater than the Rainbow Bridge of Utah by two hundred and twenty feet, and is three times as wide. The Rainbow Bridge surpasses it in height alone.

KIT CARSON'S FORT

MANY are the places marked where Kit Carson, guide and fighter of the old West, made his quarters, or where he established his reputation through daring, bravery, or his woodsman's skill. Now there is a new addition to Kit Carson relics and historic spots—the finding of Kit Carson's old fort on the Winty River—where he spent a long winter, and from where he made his famous hunt for an Indian who had stolen six horses.

There is not much to this story of the six horses—and that is why it has become so well known. It shows how quickly and simply the famous scout worked.

Setting out from the fort alone, Kit Carson went on the trail of the Indian. No one had any idea of where the Indian went, or what Kit Carson would do to get him. But Kit Carson came back—with the six horses unharmed, and the scalp of the Indian. There was no story; he brought the results, and they spoke for themselves.

Kit Carson's fort was in reality the fort of one Antoine Robidoux, who used it as a trading stronghold. Carson halted there to dispose of goods which he had brought over the Spanish Trail, and since winter set in, he decided to stay there for the season. He camped in one of the tepees with another trader.

The fort was found because some men noticed curious small mounds in the woods on the east side of the Green River, near the mouth of the Duchesne. The Duchesne had previously been called the Uintah, or Winty, River. The fort was of earthen construction, and the small mounds presented mere outlines of the structure. However, they have been charted accurately, and the result is an almost perfect description of the fort as it actually existed.

The fort was laid off in a north-south direction, with walls close to a hundred feet high. Two higher towers commanded the walls on all sides, giving the guards an excellent point of vantage. In front of the regular walls of the fort were auxiliary walls, evidently meant to withstand the attack of battering rams. Inside the fort, rooms were constructed on each side, with a plaza between the two sections.

The entire construction was of earth. From what remains of the fort, the work was extremely well done, and must have been kept in good repair throughout its use.

From records of the famous scout, life at the fort was very simple. The people played various games, using cards made of horse hide to entertain themselves at card games. The Indians would come in occasionally to do some trading, which was always a leisurely procedure, and took a lot of dickering, though it might have been done with much more speed. Evidently the fort was of such good construction, or else the surrounding territory so peaceful, that there never arose much real danger. As traffic increased, it was not necessary to keep up the trading post, and as its location was not in any way strategic, it was allowed to run down.

BE PROUD OF AMERICA!

A worthwhile slogan for all worthwhile Americans! Be Proud of America! Be proud of its glorious history, be satisfied with its tremendous wealth, cherish her glorious traditions, uphold her just dominion—Be Proud to be American!

That is our battle cry, our clarion call around which all noble Americans are gathering. It is the appeal which we are making to all clear-thinking, upright citizens of this land of ours—an appeal that comes at a time when it is necessary, when it is essential that some one gather us all under one banner, to protect our own interests, our own institutions, and our own existence from the encroachments of ruthless, selfish interests.

Americans have a world-wide reputation for fair play, for giving the other fellow more than an even break. It was an excellent reputation to have, and one well deserved—until the time when others sought to capitalize on it, when others sought to exploit it for their own benefit, and to our detriment. Fair and square as we Americans want to be, there must be an end to too much nobleness. There must come a time when we must stand up for our rights, and for ourselves.

That time has come now. There are too many outside influences at work to-day, seeking to destroy everything that is American, working, insidiously, to undermine our national pride, to belittle our national achievements, and to make little of our own country.

We are out to stop that! This magazine, and the Pete Rice Club, sponsored by this magazine, are seeking to awaken all real citizens to the danger which is besetting us. We are building up a real respect and love for our country, and giving you every reason to be proud of its history. We want every American to be a "Deputy" of Pete Rice, our foremost exponent of Americanism. Here is your opportunity to show your real Americanism. The coupon is below—the club pages following. Read both—then join!

Pete Rice Magazine
79 Seventh Ave., New York, N. Y.

Gentlemen:

Kindly deputize me as a member of the Pete Rice Club to advance and uphold the traditions of our land and forward its progress.

Name .....

Street and No.....

City and State.....

(Those desiring emblem should enclose ten cents in coin or stamps.)

The Pete Rice Club

AMERICAN IDEALS

AMERICANS have ideals, and among them is the love of their country and of its past. Americans also have a habit of not showing this love of country, mostly because we are such a square-shooting, democratic group that we do not care to spend time talking about ourselves. But, like all good-natured people, when we break loose, we do the job well. When an American is stirred up in defense of his country, he does a job that merits commendation. History proves it.

We are proving it, too. We have realized that the lack in Americans is not failure to fully appreciate their country, or to become well versed in its fine history, but that the lack is failure to properly arouse their interest in it to the extent that they would show their enthusiasm, and do something about it. The tone of our magazine, from start to finish, is strongly American—and appreciatively American, too. We felt that the organization of our club, in conjunction with the publication of this magazine, would furnish the little spark necessary to start the fires of patriotism roaring.

It has. We have countless letters, from people in all walks of life, but all people who are really Americans, through and through, giving us more and more encouragement, letting us know that they are really becoming active in this new interest in their country.

Here is one letter from Miss Estelle B. Leslie, of Arkansas. Not only Miss Leslie, but her uncle, formerly a cowboy and a secret service man, give us their views:

"I think your *Pete Rice Magazine* is wonderful. My uncle and I want to join your club. I also think that your idea of protecting and encouraging the study of history is fine. Uncle Ellic and myself would love to be deputized as members of your club. He is an old cowboy himself, and also a secret service agent in the old days. Just keep up the good work on your magazine for Unk and I are going to read it until we go blind. There is only one thing wrong with your magazine. There is not enough stories in it to please me—if you made it fifty times as thick as it is now, it wouldn't be enough!"

In one letter the spirit of both young and old America is shown. The one, a girl, must depend upon her childhood training for a real appreciation of this country. The other, an old scout, cowboy, secret service man, has gone through a great deal in this land of ours. If any one has a right to be proud of it, or has a right to have his say, such a man certainly must.

Or take this letter, from not so far west, but which shows the spirit of America, whether it be east or west. It comes from Frank Kotris, of Ohio:

"I think your *Pete Rice Magazine* is excellent, and your idea of protecting and encouraging the study of the history of our country and the West is fine. I want to be deputized a member of your club, and will do all I can to make my friends realize the importance of Americanism."

Americanism, of course, means more than just knowing the history of our country. It means knowing the country itself, knowing all of its people, and living your own life in an American way. It is a perfect formula, and one that will benefit every one who lives up to it.

We come even farther east to get another opinion, one that shows that you cannot preach a thing if you do not live it; that you cannot arouse interest of others in a principle or an idea, if you yourself have not done everything possible to imbue your own self with it. Deputy George T. Cobin, of New York, who knows the feel of the real spirit of the West, tells us where he finds it to-day:

"I have read a lot of Western books, but somehow most of them haven't the old Western spirit, as your book has, *Pete Rice Magazine*. I have read all of your books, and they rank 100% loyal to the U. S."

There is the tone of real Americanism in these letters, and in the many others which come to us. That is the spirit which the Pete Rice Club, and this magazine, want to nurture in every reader. And we want our readers to help, to take to this idea with all their enthusiasm. If all of us Americans will decide to learn more about our country, and about its history, we will find a new spirit in this country, one aggressive enough to discourage any outside instigators who look upon us as easy prey.

The coupon on page 122 gives you the opportunity for membership. There is no charge. We want your interest. That is enough to make you a member. Some members wish to wear our emblem, which is a finely polished, glittering pin with cut-out star. Such members are asked to send ten cents in cash or stamps to help pay part of the cost of manufacture. But the emblem is not necessary to membership, remember that. Your interest is all that is needed.

INDIAN REFORMS

Along with many other new plans in government, an effort is now being made to change our present handling of Indian affairs. The Indian has always been considered a ward of the government, has been forced to live as the government agents ordered him, and has had very little to say about things in general.

Possibly, when the white men first took over this land, the Indian was in a whirl in the face of all the innovations brought by the settlers. That might have been a time when he needed the paternal care of the white man, when he had to be put on reservations and all his wants attended to. Actually, since the white man took away his forests and his streams—his means of living—it was up to the white man to give him a substitute.

Now, however, things are different. A great many of the Indians receive excellent educations; they are ready to go back to their own people and be their leaders. But there is nothing they can do. The Indian on a reservation seems to have less right than an alien. He can do nothing for himself, or about himself.

This year a general conference was held, proposing various changes for the Indians. Most of them were not favored by the Indians themselves. Drawn up by men whose intentions were good, but who were probably misinformed, the proposed bills received condemnation for the most part. However, new suggestions came, and the way was opened for a general reckoning. Perhaps here, too, America will soon show its real spirit and treat the American Indian as he should be treated.

COWBOY DRESS

THE cowboy to-day dresses just as he always used to dress. Although he has changed in almost every other way, he clings to his garb tenaciously—so much so that there must be a reason for it. And there is.

The cowboy's gun to-day is not as necessary as it was when he had danger of meeting Indian enemy, or shooting rustler. He still carries it, however, for the rattlesnakes which may come across his path, or to send out of misery the pony which steps into a prairie-dog hole and breaks its leg. Or a rifle—not for Indians, or skulking killer, but for coyotes.

The ten-gallon hat comes in handy as a sunshade on hot days, and an umbrella during storm. It also makes a good utensil for watering the horse, or the man, when necessary.

The high-heeled boots are not effeminate. The slim heels keep the feet safely in the stirrups, for a slip might mean being dragged. To be thrown from a horse is almost a disgrace for a good cow-puncher, and to be dragged, once your foot has slipped from the stirrup, is a danger to be avoided.

Cigarettes, to the cowboy, are still of his own make. He is not averse to smoking the tailor-made cigarette, now manufactured in such tremendous quantities, and low prices. However, to carry a pack of cigarettes with him would result in finding most of them broken, or soggy, by the time he is ready for a smoke. In rolling his own, he has a fresh, neat cigarette any time he wants one, and his expertness at making them rivals the prowess of modern machines.

And the neckerchief—that flashiest of the cowboy's ornaments. It is not used to conceal one's face in holdups; it is used to prevent being choked by dust when riding behind a herd of cattle.

In other ways, the cowboy is pretty much the same, in nature, as he always has been. The rodeo draws him from all sides, and small towns have their population increased by fifty times when rodeo comes around. Then their bronco busters, their steer-riders, calf ropers and others have their day. And, growing up among the modern cowboys, is a "professional" group of rodeo performers who go from one town to another, living on the money earned as prizes in contests.

THE SHERIFF AGAIN

THE weather may not be an interesting topic for conversation or argument, but it is one that can always be seized and made to serve for as long a time as necessary. Next to the weather, it seems that the office of the sheriff—at least in the eastern part of our country—furnishes just as good material for discussion and "reform" programs.

One reason for all the discussion is the present tendency to check carefully on all expenditures. When the taxpayer begins to feel his tax burden, he starts thinking of ways to cut it down, and cares very little how he does it, so long as the result is what he wants it to be.

The sheriff's office still, in most places, depends a great deal on fees, side-lines, and other similar arrangements for its income. Some of the most progressive counties have placed the sheriff's office on a flat salary basis, thereby avoiding whatever dangers might have existed in the fee system. The others, however, have used that as their main point of argument. In some localities, the sheriff's office, instead of being a meager, underpaid position, had developed into a "gold mine" for the incumbent, because the fees kept on increasing as the population increased, and as business activity increased, until the sheriff's commission was beyond all rea-

sonable figures for the tasks his office required him to perform.

Immediately there were cries of wrongly administering the office, of using it to filch money from the taxpayers. Few people realize that the evil can be promptly remedied by putting the sheriff on a salary basis.

The sheriff's duties, though not complex and not as essential as they were at the time when he was about the only law-enforcing agency in the county, have grown with the years until now he is kept quite active—that is, if he does his work conscientiously.

It is the sheriff's official duty to make arrests on civil charges, serve summonses, citations, subpœnas, writs of habeas corpus and warrants of attachment. He levies executions, replevins chattels, has charge of the county jail, which houses most of the county prisoners, except for those who might be kept temporarily in local jails. He is also responsible for the transportation of prisoners.

The sheriff is liable for the escape of prisoners, he may impanel a sheriff's jury and subpœna and examine witness under oath before such a jury.

In addition to these duties, he often assumes county control over charities and such other operations as may need a guiding influence. That, however, is not strictly under his legal jurisdiction.

Of course, where the sheriff's county is sparsely settled, and where the local community police are of small number, the sheriff assumes a more important rôle. There he must actually take care of upholding the law, and is responsible for the welfare of his entire county, no matter what the crime or trouble may be. He has his organization of deputies, sometimes paid, sometimes not, and can round up a posse of citizens to carry out his orders when he needs the help. There is never a movement on foot to dethrone the sheriff from his position in counties of that sort, for there the sheriff is still the law supreme, and the citizens depend upon him entirely. There his routine duties do not count for so much; what is needed is real action, all the time.

In other counties, too, where the sheriff is an important figure, he is the logical man to control the police facilities of the entire county. Sheriffs who have shown their ability to keep all police officers in their county on their side have proven the effectiveness of this in several quick captures that would otherwise not have been possible.

Though criticism of the sheriff's office will continue, it must of necessity be cast upon individuals, and not upon the office. The capable man makes his office an important one; the one who is not able to carry the burden of his task will bring it down to his own level, to the dissatisfaction of the people.

PETE RICE MAGAZINE
79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

Gentlemen: Inclosed is $1.00 for one year's subscription to PETE RICE MAGAZINE, to be mailed monthly to my address below immediately upon publication.

Name.....

Street and Number.....

City and State.....

Our Club And Our Magazine

MICHIGAN

I happened to pick up your magazine last night for the first time, and I'm here to state that it is a wonderful magazine. The stories are all fine, so keep up the good work. I am enclosing the blank that deputizes me as a member of your club to uphold the laws of our country. I think it is a very fine idea, and hope that the club makes good. I am also promising to do my very best to help make our country a safer and better place to live in. I wish you all the luck in the world and hope you will keep up the good work.

PAUL P. MEGYESI.

NEW JERSEY

Enclosed you find ten cents in coin. I wish to be deputized a member of the Pete Rice Club. One thing I wish to say is that all the stories found in the *Pete Rice Magazine* are of A-1 quality, and I think the idea of a club is fine.

ROBERT EALER.

MARYLAND

I am a boy of thirteen. I was in the hospital for sleigh-riding. One of my friends visiting me gave me an issue of *Pete Rice Magazine*. I sat up all that night until four o'clock reading it, I liked it so well. I have not missed an issue since that day.

BARRY POISAL.

NEW YORK

I am proud to join the Pete Rice Club, as I have heard much about it. I find the magazine the best I have ever read. I hope you will get many more entries along with mine.

ROBERT PEEL.

CALIFORNIA

I have read *Pete Rice Magazine* and like it fine. I think your idea of a club is good. I would like to enroll as a member. DONALD REINEGER.

NEW JERSEY

I would like to become a member of your Club and have a badge. I am a leader of a group of boys. I would like to have you give me a few points on the law to tell the boys. I am 23 years old.

LT. WILLIAM DAHL.

BACK NUMBERS

Readers of *Pete Rice Magazine* who have missed the first issues of this magazine, and wish to become thoroughly acquainted with the adventures of Pistol Pete Rice and his deputies, Misery and Teeny, may secure back numbers by sending to the publishers. A list of titles will be sent on request, and the price of back numbers is 15 cents for one issue, or 25 cents for any two issues postpaid. Send all orders to

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79 Seventh Avenue, New York, N. Y.

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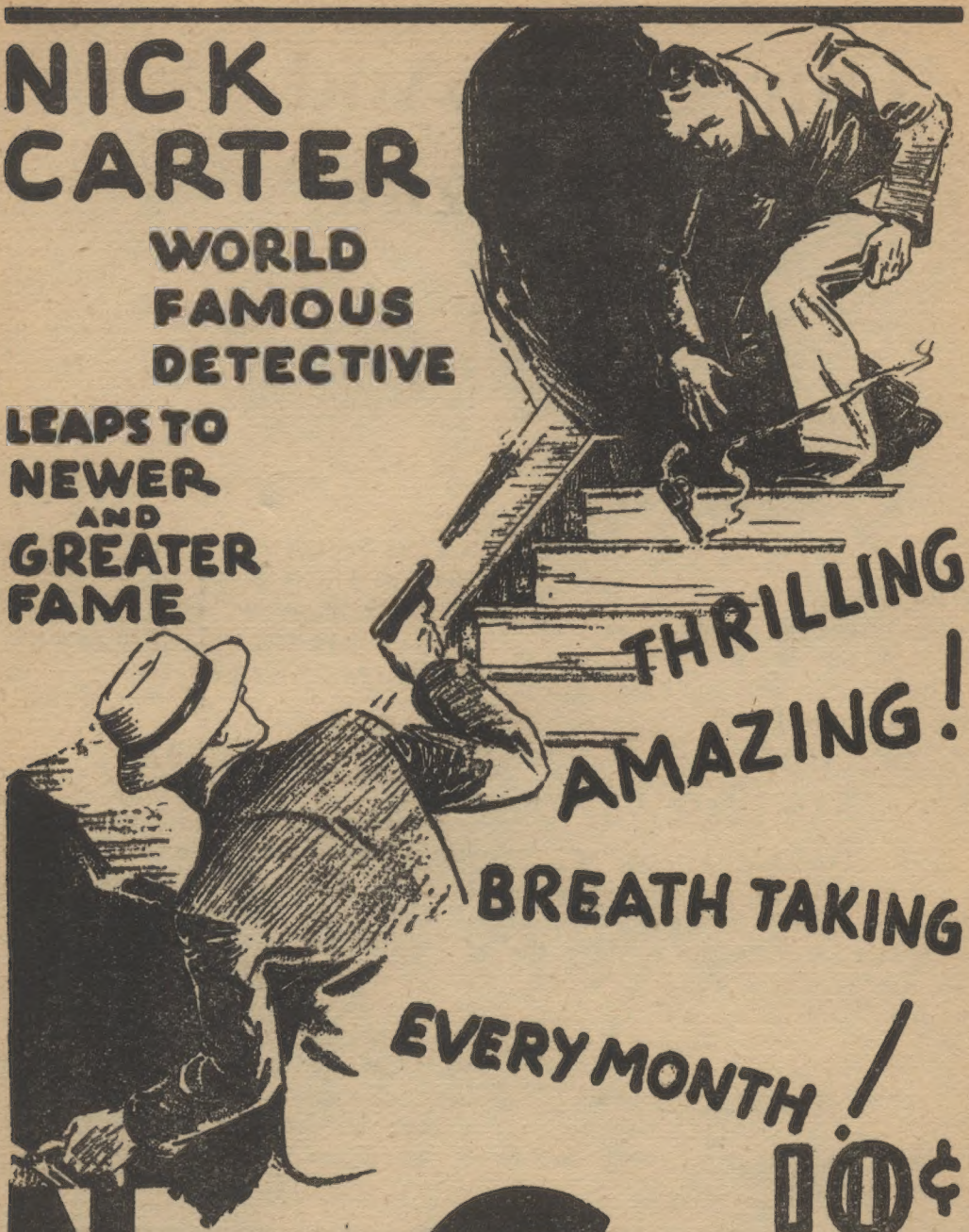

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RICE—8

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SKINNY? NEW EASY WAY ADDS POUNDS

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Astonishing gains with new double tonic. Richest imported ale yeast now concentrated 7 times, iron added. Gives 5 to 15 lbs. in a few weeks

NOW there's no need to have people calling you "skinny", and losing all your chances of making friends. Here's a new easy treatment that is giving thousands solid attractive flesh and husky strength—*in just a few weeks!*

You know doctors for years have prescribed yeast to build up health. But now with this new discovery you can get far greater tonic results than with ordinary yeast—regain health, and also put on pounds of firm, handsome flesh—*and in a far shorter time.*

Not only are thousands quickly gaining good-looking pounds, but also clear skin, new pep.

Concentrated 7 times

This amazing new product, Ironized Yeast, is made from specially cultured *brewers' ale yeast* imported from Europe—the richest yeast known—which by a new process is concentrated 7 times—*made 7 times more powerful.*

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